THE HIDDEN VALLEY

MURIEL HINE

THE HIDDEN VALLEY

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE BEST IN LIFE

AUTUMN

EARTH

THE INDIVIDUAL

APRIL PANHASARD

HALF IN EARNEST

THE MAN WITH THE DOUBLE HEART

THE BREATHLESS MOMENT

TORQUIL'S SUCCESS

THE FLIGHT

STORIES OF LOVE AND LAUGHTER

YOUTH WINS

THE SPELL OF SIRIS

THE RELUCTANT IMPOSTOR

THE HURCOTTS

THE BODLEY HEAD

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By MURIEL HINE

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PART I

"GIRLS CAN'T PLAY CRICKET"

CHAPTER I

ALTHOUGH the summer still rioted in golden days and breathless nights, the Cleeve woods were tipped with the first tawny hues of autumn's mantle.

The meadow-sweet was turning to seed, the massed ranks of herb-Robert hung heavy heads upon the bank, and a faint odour of decay rose from the huddled rushes.

Sheila breathed it in deeply with an odd satisfaction. Everything that belonged to the river appealed to her; from the shy moorhens that scuttled away at the sound of her paddle to the rush of water over the weir—forbidden ground and therefore alluring.

Beyond the islands, where the current twisted in the direction of Pangbourne, hung a blind haze suggestive of heat; the water on either side of her was olive-coloured and smooth as oil, wrapped in the shadow of the tree that projected from the low bank like a wide green umbrella. It screened her from the passing craft; but where a branch had been broken off by a vandal hand, leaving the pith exposed with a torn strip of bark, there was a loophole through which she could peep and watch a party downstream picnicking on the strip of grass between the wood and the river.

Sheila spied with growing disfavour. She saw the kettle and tin cups piled dirty in their basket and stowed away in the stern of the boat, the torn paper carelessly left to the mischievous purpose of the breeze, and the noisy exit of the party, too large for the hired craft. A tall youth with a cummerbund and a shirt that bagged fore and aft pushed off with his scull and began to row, shouting directions to the

steersman, wedged in between two girls, and apparently unaware that no frenzied pull of the ropes could turn their head against the stream until the boat had acquired momentum.

"Beasts!" said Sheila under her breath. "They ought to be warned off the river."

A swan drifted out towards the holiday crew, its white wings arched like the sails of a faery ship, its slender neck proudly curved. It was greeted with derisive comments.

"Giv' 'im one with the boat-'ook, Alf!" the leader addressed a boy in the bows. "'E don't 'alf fancy 'imself!"

The youth addressed made a playful attempt to follow out his friend's suggestion.

Sheila's eyes began to sparkle.

"If that's the Warrior, there'll be fun." She leaned sideways in the canoe, aware of the swan's reputation. He was the champion of the islands, where, in a secluded nest, his wife was sitting on three eggs. Sheila knew. She had counted them. "Ah!" She clapped her hands softly.

There had come a churning of the water, a bristling of feathers, a venomous dart, and a frightened scream from the girls.

"Look out, Alf! Don't be a fool!" The boat had lurched and swung sideways. "My! And 'e seemed that tame." They zigzagged across the stream.

The Warrior, after his spurt of revenge, pursued his course with the conscious air of disdaining battle with such a foe. He knew himself fit for a king's table.

"Good old Warrior!" Sheila approved.

Slowly the unwelcome guests laboured up the shining water, a little subdued by the contretemps. The river was lapped again in silence, save for the cry of a coot and the distant bells of Basildon chiming softly the evening hour.

Sheila snuggled down again, her dark hair against the cushion, her blue eyes peacefully closed. Balanced on her drawn-up knees was a broad hat of plaited straw surrounded by a wreath of poppies. They matched the belt round her slim waist where the lawn shirt was drawn neatly into the

starched linen skirt. Her throat was bare, brown as a berry; her hands too, and the rounded arms beneath the sleeves rolled above her elbows. At the far end of the canoe was a banjo with a single ribbon, boasting the Woolwich colours, with their faded sulphur, blue, and black, that drooped against the long handle.

A leaf fluttered off the tree and fell across the girl's feet, neat and slender in buckskin shoes, making a splash of pale green against the taut white stockings. But Sheila ignored the offering of the old willow. Sleep had claimed her. She was lost in the happy dreams of childhood.

There came a step along the bank and a low whistle, twice repeated, that held the urgency of a signal. Then beneath the shade of the woods, rising steeply up the hill, a tall boy dressed in flannels swung into sight, bare-headed too, scanning the river with anxious eyes that fell at last on the canoe. He quickened his pace, alert and eager, his long quest at an end.

Fair and well-built though still slender, with a hint of immaturity in the lines of his flung-back shoulders, he carried with him a sense of purpose which would later develop into power. Noiselessly he descended the bank and stood for a moment gazing down on the face of the sleeper. He did not see what other men, more critical, would have remarked: that the features were irregular with no claim to classical beauty; that the mouth, though full, closed coldly with a trace of disdain—the disdain of childhood for all that approaches sentiment; nor that the smooth and clear young skin was tanned by the sun and deeply freckled. For Sheila spelt for him Romance: love in its first golden vision—that clean love in which reverence thrusts from it the thought of passion. His eyes were wistful as he gazed. She seemed so unapproachable. Then his youth reasserted itself and mischief curved his fresh lips. Now was the opportunity he had sought for all the afternoon.

Cautiously he leaned forward and lifted the banjo from its place, dived down into his pocket and produced an envelope.

This held a red ribbon, sacred to Sandhurst, with narrow white stripes. Ruthlessly the Woolwich emblem was hacked away with a blunt penknife and tossed aside on the bank, to be supplanted by the other. His hands, long and powerful, with the well-shaped nails of his caste, busied themselves with the "perfect" knot—one that would "never come undone"!

"That'll beat her." He smiled to himself as he tested the strength of it. "Now——" Steadying the canoe, carefully he replaced the banjo.

Then, for the first time, indecision marked his actions. He wanted her, so badly, to wake. Yet, somehow, to watch her sleeping appealed to his protective sense. She looked such a child, with the dark lashes sweeping the curve of her flushed cheeks and a curl of hair that had slipped from the hold of her tortoise-shell comb on to her shoulder and snuggled against the warm brown neck. A wave of longing swept over him. He would have given half the world to kiss her awake and steal from her a drowsy moment of affection before reason dawned in her brain. Yet he could not take a mean advantage. He dug his fingers into the grass where he squatted on the river's brink. Some remote wisdom steadied him. She would never forgive him—afterwards! She would say at once it was "not cricket."

He began to whistle; softly at first, then louder as he saw her stir under this strident melody, the latest catch from the music-halls. She stretched up a sleepy arm over her head. The canoe rocked. In a moment she was wide awake.

"Hullo!" She laughed at the patient figure. "Where did you spring from, Lance?"

"Dropped in to tea with your people and they told me you were on the river, so I marched along until I found you." He did not add that this had included a hot walk in the wrong direction before he had turned back to the woods. He was sensitive to her mockery. "You do look lazy!"

She made a face.

"Why did you come and wake me up? I was having a perfectly heavenly dream."

"What was it about?" he asked, filled with a hopeful curiosity.

"I was climbing mountains."

His face fell.

"Simply ripping," she explained. "All in the snow, like we did last year. With Father and Rex and old Jimmy."

"You might have included me." He was too young to hide his chagrin.

"Why?" She yawned on the word.

"Oh, I don't know." He looked away. "Wake up now and give us a tune."

"All right. Hand me the jo."

He passed the instrument across. She began to tune it, then paused, amazed.

"Hullo! Where did this come from?" She fingered the Sandhurst ribbon. The boy on the bank fidgeted. He was nervous but laughed it off.

"Can't imagine." He studied her face.

"*Can't* you!" Her expression changed from amusement to indignation. "And what have you done with my gunpowder colours? Oh, Lance, you *are* a beast! Give them back to me at once."

"They were faded. Besides, I bar them. Too showy for my taste." He spoke rather sulkily. "You're a nice girl, aren't you? After all my precious trouble."

But Sheila was not to be moved by pity. Her eyes darted over the grass and at last discovered the missing treasure. With a supple movement she rose to her feet, stepped out on to dry land, steadying the canoe behind her with a cautious foot as it swayed. Then, as Lance sprawled sideways to clutch at the ribbon, she pushed him back, a strong young hand on his shoulder, and swooped down on her possession.

"And you've cut it away! It's all hacked! I'll tell Jimmy. He'll murder you!"

"*Will* he?" The boy glowered. "I'd like to see him. He's half my weight."

"With double your wits. That counts! Or he wouldn't

have got into Woolwich. Any boy can pass for Sandhurst." She was merciless in her displeasure.

"You're rubbing it in nicely, aren't you? I believe you're half in love with Jimmy."

She turned on him haughtily.

"*I?*" It was evident that she took the suggestion for an open insult. "When you talk like that I simply hate you."

The ring of truth in her scornful voice frightened him. He began to coax.

"Don't be so awfully hard on a chap. I didn't mean it, old girl, really." She was tugging ineffectually at the new ribbon on the banjo. "You're not going to take it off?"

"I am."

He watched her in gloomy silence. Then the reaction set in, his personal dignity at stake.

"All right. Ta-ta!" He turned on his heel, his hands in his pockets.

The girl paused in her exertions and watched his retreating figure, the stubborn set of the young shoulders. A slow admiration conquered her wrath.

"Lance!"

He did not turn his head. She dropped the banjo on the grass and was after him impulsively. He felt a hand slipped through his arm; her penitent voice was in his ear.

"Come back! Don't be so silly."

But he wanted to taste to the full his triumph.

"Not unless you keep my ribbon."

"Well, I will—but Jimmy's too. I can't be mean to an old pal. You wouldn't like it yourself, would you?"

"N—o." He didn't want to share her, and Sheila had so many friends. He was tortured by constant jealousy.

"Well, are you going to make it up?"

He turned and faced her, his eyes wistful.

"I never *want* to quarrel with you. But you don't understand."

"Understand what?" She gave his arm a little shake.

"That I love you."

The words were out. Instantly he knew, to his cost, that the confession was premature. The girl stepped back with a frown.

"Don't. You mustn't say such things." She gave a furtive glance at his face, and seemed relieved by his expression. For the boy had himself in hand. "You're only rotting? I might have guessed it."

"I'm not. I'm telling you the truth. I've been in love with you for ages. I know you don't care for me. Not well enough *yet*——" He began to stammer. "B—but I hoped——" he broke off, set his teeth, and finished the phrase, "that, some day, you'd m—marry me." It sounded bald in his own ears.

"Oh no!" She shrank away. "I'm not going to marry anyone—*ever*! I'm not that sort—you might have known. Though I like you most awfully. We've had some ripping times together." She met his hurt, accusing eyes, and flushed to the roots of her hair. "Why, you haven't thought——? Oh, you *couldn't*!" Her hands went up to her cheeks, flaming now with sudden shame.

"No." His voice was miserable.

"Then, let's forget." It was a whisper.

"*Forget!*" The word was hoarse with feeling. "Don't you care—can't you care a little? Oh, Sheila, do try. You don't know what it means to me. And I can't explain. I didn't want to tell you to-day. It slipped out." He clenched his hands and looked away, powerless in the grip of a passion that refused to become articulate.

A little silence fell between them. Sheila was thinking with frowning brows. The situation was beyond her, and Lance looked so utterly wretched. She felt that she must comfort him.

"Well, let's pretend it hasn't happened, and go back as we were." She stole up to his side, childishly unaware that her close proximity troubled him. "I can't *bear* to quarrel with you! I was beastly about that ribbon. You were a dear to think of it. *There!*" She slipped her hand into his.

The warm touch and the contrast between the action and her chilling speech completed the strain upon his nerves. He caught her fingers up to his lips and kissed them hotly, half distraught.

"You hurt me so! You've no heart. You couldn't say things like that if you had. If a fellow really loves a girl it's *everything*, or just nothing! He doesn't want plain friendship. I couldn't stand it. It isn't fair."

Before the torrent of words had ceased, she had torn her hand from his clasp, all her pity turned to anger.

"So I don't play fair?" She stamped her foot. "You're the first boy who's told me that. I've tried my best to be nice to you, but I've done now! That's the end. I don't believe in love at all. Anyhow, not yet." She was getting rather incoherent. "But when I do, I'll love a *man*!" She stopped, too late, on the cruel word, for her lover's face frightened her.

"You will, will you? Well, I hope he'll give you all that a *boy* could offer!" His lips curved bitterly. "The trouble is you're only a child. I'm a long sight older than you. You've still got a lot to learn. Some man will teach you a lesson. It won't be me." He choked for a moment. "Because you'll never see me again. I'm going away—to forget you."

Yet he hesitated, unaware that his indecision marked his youth and roused in her, unconsciously, the contempt of a stronger nature.

"Go, then." Her voice was icy. As he did not move, she turned away.

"Sheila!" An agony of love and longing rang out in the word.

She gave a frightened glance backward over her shoulder, stirred by the cry.

"No, no. It's no good. If you won't be friends, it's all over." She paused to gather up the banjo.

The finality of the speech moved him to hot resentment.

"I can't."

He stood there watching her as she stepped down into the canoe, unmoored it hastily from the bank, and threw in the rope with a slap. Then she picked up the paddle, and with a vicious downward thrust sent the still waters swirling. Her head was bent to avoid the green archway of leaves. She shot through, the wet branches trailing against her cheek, and the tree intercepted his vision.

He listened for the sound of the strokes. She was making her way towards the islands. He began to run along the bank, inwardly aware of his weakness, chafing against it, yet refusing to accept this unhappy parting. Now he was abreast with her.

"Sheila!" he called over the water.

Deliberately she turned the canoe across the stream away from him, backwatering recklessly. The frail craft heeled sideways. She righted it with a careless effort. But she showed no other signs of his presence. A shaft from the setting sun was snared by the metal rim of the banjo. It flashed like a flame spurting up. Above it floated a single ribbon—red, with narrow streaks of white.

It seemed to convince him of his folly. He stopped dead, aware of all that had followed the short moment of triumph when he had secured his gift.

With the "perfect" knot! The symbol had lied. The last link was snapped between them, though his colours flaunted on the breeze. His eyes were smarting, his throat throbbed. He turned blindly and forged up the steep slope into the woods, seeking the gloom and the solitude with the instinct of youth that hugs its grief.

No man had ever loved before so hopelessly! Life was finished. He stumbled on to the flat path above the tangled undergrowth, and strode along in a line with the river, kicking up the soft dust of innumerable perished leaves.

After a little, the exercise began to soothe his vigorous body and clear the congestion in his brain. Plans rose up before him with a detached yet alluring aspect. He would have a dramatic future; become, at least, a famous General. He

saw himself Commander-in-Chief—without the slightest hesitation—the youngest England had ever known. Sheila, possibly wedded to Jimmy—a *gunner*! one knew what gunners were, "mad, married, or Methodist"—would repent her conduct that afternoon. He hunted for his cigarettes. Then he replaced the case in his pocket. He felt a scruple against smoking with the touch of her fingers still haunting his lips; those strong little hands he loved so dearly. He wished now he had kissed her awake when she lay sleeping in the canoe, stealing one perfect memory. He dwelt on the thought until the flood of his old misery engulfed him. Then he came to the end of the path. Before him was a locked gate with an aggressive notice-board, on which was printed in heavy letters:

"TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED."

He stared at it and collected his wits. Slowly a grin widened his mouth; an answering twinkle awoke in his eyes. He swarmed the gate and dropped down on the other side with a thud. Here was the tonic of adventure.

Meanwhile Sheila had reached the islands. She avoided the narrower of the channels, mindful of the sitting swan, and ran the canoe into the rushes fringing the bank beneath the woods. An evening breeze sang through the boughs of the tall trees overhead, and a ripple ran, like a little shiver, across the pool in this tiny harbour. It stirred the green plate-like leaves of the water-lilies and swayed their cups, half open, showing their amber hearts, scentless in their sterile beauty. Like the girl, they knew no passion. Only an instinct towards growth on their long stems concealed by the water which the tadpoles used as skipping-ropes.

Sheila's disgust had given place to a sudden wave of depression. The old longing of her childhood rose up and escaped in speech.

"Why wasn't I born a boy?" She snapped off an intrusive rush that was making stabs at her hair and began to peel it

absently. "This wouldn't have happened then. I should have *loved* to have been a man."

It did not seem to occur to her that had Providence so arranged the matter she might have been tramping the woods above, eating out her heart for a girl!

She thrust Lance from her mind. He had shown by his conduct that he was not worth the friendship she had offered him. It was so silly for a "pal" to talk nonsense about love. Just like a tuppenny novel! She curled the white sap of the rush into a neat little mat and watched it uncoil on her knee. It worked like a watch-spring, elastic, alive.

It reminded her of a fatal day when, with the help of her brother, she had taken the schoolroom clock to pieces, eager to discover the secret of its internal economy. Despair had followed in due course when the parts refused to go back into place and the clock-case gaped at them mockingly.

Jolly days! She heaved a sigh. She had almost been a boy then in her country life with her brother. Though Rex had brought her her first disillusion. She had been his chosen mate and comrade up to the time when he went to school, sharing in his wildest tricks, often herself the ring-leader. But, once the harder world of his own sex had accepted him, his faith in his sister suffered a lapse which had led up to the dismal crisis one summer holiday. Rex had returned and brought a friend, an older boy whom he admired. The pair were inseparable, the little girl looking on wistfully, attempting to join them. Then the mandate had gone forth: "Girls can't play cricket."

Even now, recalling it, a cold hand gripped her heart. How she had cried that afternoon, pretending to garden in the patch where nothing grew properly except the walnut-tree in the middle, robbing the other plants of life.

She realized in after years that, save for the love of one man, nothing could reach to the height of devotion on which she had pinnacled her brother.

Her thoughts drifted back farther. To the Sundays sacred to her father, when he taught them jumping in the field over

a pair of low hurdles. She knew she had been as brave as Rex, with the comforting help of riding-breeches—no skirt; it was dangerous, if you took a toss you might be dragged. Then the long wet afternoons when they boxed in turn with their nimble father, standing on the nursery table in order to reach up to his face. She could see those diminutive boxing-gloves and hear again her mother's protest when a tap on the nose "drew claret"—a painful but proud moment!

And that first glorious day to hounds, against rules. Sheila smiled, the scene vividly before her. She had gone to the meet with her father, a queer little mite in a flowing habit with a black velvet jockey's cap and her thick hair streaming below it, as she perched on her single pommel and sawed at the mouth of the patient pony. She recalled Mr. Travers' parting injunction: "Mind you go straight home, child." He had added a word to the groom. But a spirit of daring had overcome the higher claim of obedience. The groom, a young and ardent sportsman, had given in to her wheedling.

They had followed, through cross-country lanes, and joined in the first wild gallop, far in the rear, scrambling through torn gaps in the frosty hedges. Soon, too soon, they had been outpaced, losing a share in the great adventure. Losing, too, their sense of direction after a further "short cut." There ensued an endless ride home, in the teeth of a biting wind, and late, very late in the evening, a weary child had been lifted down, stiff with cold and sore from the saddle, before the porch where the robin lived, and carried straight up to bed. Twenty miles, so her father computed, the scolding postponed in the first flush of a fellow-feeling with the culprit—and most of it later reserved for the groom! Even Rex had not ridden farther. That night she *was* a boy.

Sheila glowed at the memory. Why couldn't life be always like that? Why should sex enter in? Lance might have understood. She wanted men as friends, not lovers. She stared gloomily through the dusk.

The wind had risen. Round the bend of the island came a

flicker of red, the sail of an approaching boat. In the stern a man lounged lazily, pipe in mouth, steering with his crooked elbow as he paid out the rope. Sheila watched him, interested. His hair was a deep copper colour, brushed straight back from a high forehead. His features were carved as though with a chisel, the aquiline nose and firm chin suggesting a profile on a medal. His clothes, shabby but well-cut, hung on a body lean and strong, well-proportioned, with square shoulders. An ancient pair of canvas shoes, once white, displayed above them incongruous silk socks. One foot was propped on the gunwale. He sucked away at his pipe, unconscious of her presence.

She wondered idly who he could be. She knew most of the Goring people, but this man was a stranger. She put him down as belonging to Pangbourne. But her eyes followed the red sail.

Basildon church rang out the hour. It was time to be getting home. She picked up her paddle regretfully and followed in the stranger's wake. When she got to the broader stretch of water the wind dropped suddenly. She saw the sail flap loosely and the boat ahead slacken speed. Now was the moment to pass by him. The light canoe travelled swiftly. She felt the peculiar joy of the wet-bob in beating a superior craft. The water frothed under her stroke, but a puff of wind filled the sail, and her enemy turned the bows across the stream with the intention of tacking. He gave a quick glance over his shoulder, but she disregarded his warning frown. With a mischievous smile she shot past, holding steadily to her course. She caught his grumbling exclamation. When she reached the end of the woods she turned and risked a quick look behind her. The red sail was drawing close. It was to be a race between them!

"But he doesn't know that I'm near home." She hugged herself, full of this secret advantage, putting on a last spurt as the ferry-house came into sight.

Close at hand ran the narrow creek where willows shrouded the abode of the canoe and other boats, sacred to her river

home. Still she kept a straight course, guarding her secret to the last. She could hear the gurgle of the water under the bows of the sailing-boat. A minute more, it would be abreast. With a backward pressure on her paddle she swung round, shaving the end of the spit of land that guarded the creek.

"Bravo!" cried a gay voice. "*You've* won! By half a length."

The temptation to answer was too strong. She might repent it afterwards, but, in the flush of victory, she flung convention overboard.

"The wind failed you." Generously she allowed her opponent every due. "It always does at that corner when you're sailing upstream."

"Righto! I'll remember. Good night." His voice was musical.

"Good luck!" Her boyish answer was shouted from the dim boat-house.

But she waited there, hot and breathless. A sudden doubt had succeeded the moment of joyous impulse, the same doubt that was to assail her in after years when she met a man half-way in open friendship and read in his eyes a secret wonder, a questioning of her honesty.

She peered out round the willows. The red sail had been swallowed up by the distant railway bridge, a monument of hideous worth that spanned the river between the meadows.

Then she emerged on the towing-path, nodding to the ferry-man who was smoking a pipe in his patch of garden.

"Good night."

"Good night, miss." He touched his cap. "Looks like lasting." He leered at the sky.

"Hope so." She passed on, the furrow still between her brows.

"I'd better keep that adventure dark. Mother wouldn't understand." She crossed the strip of sun-bleached meadow, where the bats were whirling aimlessly, still blinded by the twilight, and came to the long walled garden. She lifted the

latch of the painted gate and paused for a moment, still thoughtful.

"Bother!" She gave herself a shake. "It's poor fun being a girl. Especially when you grow up."

An impatient sigh succeeded the outburst.

Before her rose the gabled house, with windows like cunning little eyes, peering at her beneath the eaves. The purple shadow of the cedar made a semicircle on the lawn at the end of the long gravelled path between the crowded herbaceous borders. A voice called through the dusk:

"Is that you, Sheila? You're late, my child."

"Sorry, mother." Mechanically she turned down her sleeves and tidied her hair.

CHAPTER II

"THEN that's settled," said Mrs. Travers, with a smile that included the small party gathered round the breakfast table. "Captain Craik will take Cara to Whitchurch, to look at that cottage. In the canoe. Father and I will drive across to Goring Heath and call at the farm where I get my ducks, and we'll have a picnic tea on the river. Not too early. About five." She paused as her eyes met those of her husband, a humorous twinkle in their depths.

"Yes, my dear," he answered promptly. He knew of old his wife's habit of planning the day in advance, and that within a few hours the original scheme would be modified or forgotten. But he loved this still beautiful woman with her gentle, distinctive charm and quiet air of dignity. She remained the ideal of his youth, untouched by the long years of struggle before he had built up his fortune. He felt, too, the pride of a man who marries into a class above him and succeeds by the power of his brain in surrounding his wife with luxury.

He owed her in return a debt. She had never emphasized the fact of the difference in their degrees, even in rare moments of temper. Their sympathy was complete, despite their dissimilarity in character, which showed itself in a hundred little acts daily. Where she relied on her gentle birth, he was upheld by his shrewd wits. Her strength was purely passive; his the active, unceasing effort of a man who strains towards a goal.

"And Sheila?" Mrs. Travers continued placidly, turning to the girl.

She answered without hesitation:

"I shall punt up to Goring and wire to town for some more films. Can I do any shopping for you, mother?"

"No, dear. But why not write?" In her manner towards her only daughter there was always this gentle hint of correction. She had never realized the fact that her offspring had left the nursery. The girl, broad-minded like her father, accepted it as "Mother's way," though at times it roused her impatience.

"I shouldn't get them in time," she explained. "They want me to photograph the crew for the Dongola race for a weekly paper and I've used up my last roll."

"Very well." Mrs. Travers sighed. She excelled in small economies, extravagant in other matters.

Sheila, aware of this, added:

"I've heaps of money. At least——" She paused and dived down into her pocket for a leather purse, opened it, and counted out five pennies. "Bother! I wonder where it's gone?"

The man on her right began to chaff her.

"That's the worst of dropping in at all hours at the *Miller of Mansfield*." It was an old joke between them. For Sheila, missing one hot afternoon, had been found in that place of refreshment with her Sandhurst friend and two long glasses balanced on a stool between them.

"Here you are!" Her father laughed and tossed a shilling across to her.

She caught it neatly.

"Thanks, dad. But I only want a penny, please."

"All right." He changed the coin, to Captain Craik's nward amusement.

Her cousin, Cara, expostulated:

"Silly girl! Never refuse anything that's offered you. The world's not a generous place." Her glance flitted from father to child, and, as if drawn by the soldier who sat facing her at the table, rested on his handsome face. Something flashed between the pair, a question and answer. She lowered her eyes. It passed unnoticed by the others, who were busy again with a discussion regarding some detail of the regatta.

Captain Craik still studied Cara's veiled expression. She was a very pretty woman of twenty-five, with fair hair and a pathetic droop of the lips, the wife of a well-known barrister whom she had married, when nineteen, at the end of her first season. An unhappy match; so people said. But she made the best of her life, being extremely popular and possessed of ample means. Craik was an old friend of hers. She had introduced him to Mrs. Travers and secured for him the present invitation for a week-end on the river which had lengthened out to a fortnight.

For the Gate House was hospitable. People came and went as they liked, with the result that the place was packed at one moment and empty at others. The Traverses had a house in town where they entertained in the season, returning to Goring for the summer and early autumn, enjoying there a simpler form of existence.

Sheila would have gladly passed the whole year in the country. She had never appreciated the move from her old home in the North to London, with its many restrictions; a change necessitated by the growth in her father's business. He was a wealthy contractor, the son of a solicitor's clerk in Northumberland, unashamed of the fact, but lacking the offensive pride of the "self-made" man who proclaims it aloud. Nature in planning his powerful brain had added the leaven of common sense and a self-respect that never faltered, whilst his wife's gentle influence had preserved him from the many pitfalls that await a man who purchases a foothold in society.

Sheila secretly adored him. Now, as she pocketed her penny, she smiled to herself. It was so like Dad to understand her impulse of pride. She had her regular allowance and kept to it, as well as she could, though towards the end of the quarter she was generally hard pressed.

She did not reply to her cousin's remark. She was fond of Cara, who petted her and took her out in society, but at times the light philosophy of the married woman jarred on her.

"And where's Lance?" asked Mrs. Travers as she rose gracefully from the table. "He hasn't been in these last few days."

Craik had reached the dining-room door and was holding it open. He answered his hostess, checking her on the threshold.

"It's a secret. I mustn't tell you. Except that he's escaping from justice."

"Now, what do you mean by that?" Mrs. Travers waited, smiling. She had a most attractive smile, which was not limited to the lips, as is the case with so many women. It warmed her fine blue eyes under their fair arched brows.

Craik was struck by her air of youth.

"If you look at me like that," he laughed, "I shall let out the whole story."

The little familiarity was covered by his air of respect. No one could take a liberty with Mrs. Travers. There was about her an atmosphere difficult to describe: the regal simplicity of a child. Here was a woman who never stooped to a single impurity of thought, who preferred to remain ignorant rather than learn the sins of the world.

"Now, you're trying to flatter me." She accepted the compliment, amused. "I insist upon knowing what's happened." He had roused her curiosity.

Travers watched the uneven contest.

"He'll give in," he thought to himself, with a loving touch of admiration for the tall woman in the doorway, so erect in her middle age, the little head bent sideways on her long and slender neck. "She's beautiful, bless her heart!" Then his attention was caught by Sheila. The girl looked unusually grave. She was listening anxiously.

"Well"—Craik glanced at Cara as if seeking for advice—"I don't suppose it matters, really. You're not a J.P., are you, sir?" He turned to his host, his dark eyes full of mischief, and as the latter denied the suggestion, went on to explain. "He had a slight misunderstanding with a keeper. Both men suffered. Lance was packed off to Scotland and the affair hushed up."

"When?" Sheila's voice was abrupt.

"Three days ago."

She nodded, relieved.

"Good old Lance!" Her expression had changed. "I hope he got the best of it. He always enjoys a 'scrap.'"

The others laughed. It was said with such a hearty sympathy.

"It's really very foolish of him," Mrs. Travers put in gently. "He's only a child—so impulsive!"

A child! They were all children to her: the thought flashed through Sheila's mind. She experienced for the first time a faint sense of womanly triumph. Lance had asked her to marry him. What would her mother say to *that*? Besides, he hadn't gone off in a huff as she feared at first; though he might have come to say good-bye. She supposed that his people had packed him off in a hurry. His father had a temper. Poor Lance! She pitied him. He was subject to rules, like herself.

She dwelt on the peculiar fact that "growing up" was a process which did not ensure the liberty of the individual perceptibly, as she sauntered out into the garden, a hand tucked through her cousin's arm.

That lady, with intuition, marked the absorption of the girl.

"Thinking of Lance?" she asked softly. "He's slipped away from your teasing now. I used to be sorry for that boy."

"Sorry—why?" Sheila looked curiously at the pale face with its pointed chin and drooping mouth. "How silly you are. You don't understand."

"Don't I?" Her voice was low. She stooped to tear off a rose and tuck it into her muslin dress. The sharp thorns pricked her finger. "Oh!" She sucked it ruefully. "That's why. Because it hurts—'gathering roses while ye may.' And far worse when ye mayn't—— What nonsense I'm talking! Run and play. I'm going on the river with Tim."

"Who is here," said a voice behind her.

"Listening to my philosophy?" She spoke coolly. She made no room for him to join them on the path.

"Yes. Well kept to heel!"

"Good dog!" Sheila whistled. "Move up, Cara. You *are* selfish. There's heaps of room for old Tim."

He slipped between them skilfully.

"That's better!" He tucked a hand into an arm on either side. "Now, you girls, step out. It's going to be a broiling day, and I vote we get on the river early."

They swung across the uneven meadow where a solitary red cow was munching the short sunburnt grass, her tail lashing at the flies. The ferryman was in midstream with a passenger —a stout woman in a black mantle and ponderous bonnet, weighed down with ebony grapes. Most funereal she looked, sitting very stiff and solemn on the wide seat, gripping the side with a hand encased in a split kid glove.

"*She's* going to enjoy herself," Craik announced in a cheerful voice. "She's off to the funeral of her life! Sherry and cake"—he smacked his lips—"and enough gossip to last a twelvemonth. A 'bee-u-tiful corpse'!"

"Oh, don't be horrid!" Cara broke away from his side.

Sheila was laughing whole-heartedly.

"I'm not. I'm really sympathetic. Life would be a flat affair without the subtle fear of death to quicken the joy of snatching one's pleasures. It makes one glad to be alive." He drew in a deep breath of the clean, sunny air. "Look at that sky and the dear old woods. I'm so happy I want to dance, or sing. Or kiss the woman I love best! May I, Sheila?" He winked at her and pretended to offer a sunburnt cheek.

She laughed back. They were good pals.

"I'd sooner be kissed by the ferryman. *He* wants cheering up."

"I think you'd find him a bit scrubby! He only shaves twice a week—for Sundays and for his wife. She's allowed this privilege on Thursday, his day off. She has to be quick with the kiss as he heads straight for the nearest pub. This is called the 'romance of the poor.'"

Cara was walking a pace ahead. Craik's eyes followed her,

noting the droop of her delicate shoulders under the broad-brimmed river hat. In her lilac frock, she reminded him of one of the cuckoo-pints in the meadow, flower-like with a flower's grace, unfit for the hard battle of life. She had never acquired the settled poise of a happily married woman, but preserved the detached air of a child.

"The ferryman has decided views," he went on in his pleasant voice. "I had a chat with him last night. He's retrograde in his opinions. I fancy his missus gives him trouble." He glanced up at the square cottage with its tight-closed windows blocked by plants, and lowered his voice thoughtfully. "His favourite maxim seems to be: 'Females oughter be kept in their place.' Do you agree?" he asked Sheila.

"Depends on what you call their place."

"That's subtle." Craik laughed. "If I had a wife, I should purchase a chain and fasten it round her little waist. The other end would be linked to my watch. How's that for a definition?"

Cara glanced back over her shoulder scornfully.

"Nice for her! I can see her dragging after you."

"Not at all." He spoke quickly. "Once I knew that I had her safe I should expect her to lead. That's where my friend the ferryman disagrees with my theories. He says: 'They always tries to get the upper 'and, and if you lets 'em life ain't worth living.' I fancy his wife *jerks* at the chain. Here we are!" He scrambled down into the dim boat-house. "I'd better get out the punt first. Which pole do you want, Sheila?"

"The heavy one. The bamboo's bent." She straightened a fold in Cara's collar. "How silent you are. Anything wrong?"

"No. I've rather a headache this morning." The old excuse of the sex, equally useful for temper or love.

"Poor dear." Sheila was sorry.

Craik, emerging in the punt, gave Cara a sidelong glance.

"Would you rather not go?" His voice was anxious.

"No. I'll come." She avoided his eyes.

"Well, we won't struggle as far as Whitchurch; we'll moor up somewhere under the trees."

"As you like." She seemed indifferent.

Sheila thought them rather gloomy. She was glad to find herself alone, heading upstream, a few minutes later, whilst the canoe drifted away in the opposite direction. She turned for a last wave to the pair, but received no recognition. She could see the muscular back of the soldier move to the play of his paddle and catch a glimpse of Cara's face. She was leaning back, her eyes half closed, her cheek propped on one hand, with the same weary, absorbed expression.

"Tim bores her," Sheila decided. "But, if so, why do they stay?" She gave up the problem—it was beyond her—and swung in her pole lustily.

Yes, it was good to be alive on a morning like this and to feel the boat spring forward under her stroke as she balanced herself easily. Good to feel her body tingle and her lungs expand as she took deep breaths, and to know in her exultant heart that she "punted as well as any man"!

Below the hideous arch of the bridge a fisherman sat, with eyes glued on his float. She made a detour when she reached him, careful not to disturb his sport. On and on, past a long white house with trim lawns sloping down and a launch moored at the landing-stage; past the islands in the bend, where her quick ear detected voices from some hidden boat in the narrow channel, and her eyes were caught by a flash of blue as a kingfisher swooped down to the water.

Little beads of moisture stood on her smooth forehead. The sun burned down, blistering her bared arms. Still she did not slacken her pace. On her left was Streatley Rectory with its fine old gardens, the rendezvous of many a pair of summer lovers. On a sheltered platform above the stream she could see the flutter of a skirt, and a youth in close proximity. She gave them a scornful glance. Goring bridge rose before her with its turnpike and white railings. The noise of the weir mingled with the far-off purr of the mill-

wheel. So at last she reached the lock and found three other boats waiting.

She was not sorry for the respite. Hunting for her handkerchief she drew it across her flushed face and glanced at the watch in her belt.

"I broke the record that time. I wish Lance hadn't gone." She longed to tell him of her exploit, missing his interest in her doings.

"Lock-oh!" The boat before her took up the cry impatiently. A man appeared at the left of the gates. Slowly they began to open.

"Not yet, if you please, sir. There's a launch to come out. Keep to the bank." He restrained the foremost of the party.

From the green, tomb-like enclosure came the vast black bows of a "joy-boat," crowded with a swarm of trippers. The burble of a gramophone rose above the hoarse chatter. A girl squealed, and from the cabin came the clink of bottles against glasses.

"Beginning early," thought Sheila, watching for the wash of the paddles, a steady hand on her pole. "Here it comes." A diagonal wave tilted the punt and splashed, foiled, against the shored bank beyond.

Still rocked by the troubled waters, she evaded the trio of boats in front and crossed to the opposite side of the lock, mooring herself to a slimy chain with the aid of her boat-hook.

The lock-keeper gave her a nod as he passed.

Sheila returned his greeting.

"Any pears fit to eat?" she called to him across the gulf. "Oh, I forgot. I've not enough money."

Some one on her right laughed. She looked up. Two men were sitting on the bank, gazing steadily down at her. One was dark and very thin, the other had copper-coloured hair, shabby shoes, and silk socks.

She looked away hastily. She was not going to recognize him.

"That doesn't matter, miss." The lock-keeper was calling back. "Next time as you're passing. But I 'aven't got pears, only plums."

"Thanks, I'll wait." To her disgust she felt the blood mounting up under her skin to the roots of her hair under the steady stare from above.

Recklessly she moved forward. Now she grasped the last chain with her hand, her back turned to her audience.

The gates opened rather quickly. The rush of water pouring down caught the head of the long punt and swung it round sway from the wall. The strain on her arm was intolerable. She made a mistake and leaned outwards, destroying her balance where she stood in the centre between the cushions.

Fully aware of the new danger she let go and caught up the boat-hook. As they rose she made a lunge at the bank, missed it, the punt tipped sharply, and the water poured over the bows. Cries rose from the other boats. She sprang back across the seat in sudden panic to the stern, which still hugged the side of the lock.

Then a voice reached her ears from a level above:

"Don't be frightened."

A pair of hands gripped her waist on either side, she was lifted up in a powerful grasp and found herself, breathless, on dry land.

"Oh!" She stood there, dazed for a moment.

"Won again," said a laughing voice. She looked up and saw brown eyes and a face like the imprint on a coin.

"Thanks." She tried to collect her wits. "My punt!" She frowned into the lock. The man at the sluice had seen the danger, a little late, and checked the flow. Water-logged, with soaked cushions, it rocked athwart the dark basin. At the sight she lost her temper.

"I've never done such a thing before. Fool!" She struck her knee with her hand.

"You might have been drowned," said the thin man severely.

The other still chuckled, watching the girl.

"Not I!" she flung back, annoyed by his patronizing manner. "I'll bet I can swim as well as you."

"One for our poet," said his companion. "But I fancy

Pat prefers paddling. He would have watched you placidly and written an ode as his contribution. Beginning 'Fair, yet so reckless.'"

"Oh, dry up!" the thin man muttered.

Sheila laughed. She could not help it. The little outburst had relieved her. There was something about her rescuer which appealed to her. He made no fuss. He seemed to think it quite natural to save a girl like a drowning puppy.

The lock-keeper hurried across.

"You was too high up, miss," he shouted at her, red-faced and annoyed. "It ain't safe. I've warned you before, when the river's high." He caught the stern of the wet punt with his boat-hook and drew it level.

Sheila moved towards the steps, but her new friend was before her.

"You can't get into that," he said. "Let me take it out of the lock and round to Saunders." He jerked his head in the direction of the boat-house, which lay on a sheltered creek beyond. "He'll get it drained and the cushions dry. Please——" as she started to protest—"Look here, I've saved your life." His merry brown eyes mocked at himself. "At grave personal risk, you know. You owe me something in return, if it's only to let me do as I like."

"All right." It sounded grudging. "I mean," she added rather shyly, "it's really awfully kind of you. I'll walk across and explain to Saunders."

"Righto. I'll meet you there." He stepped gingerly into the punt.

The thin young man had been looking on with a cool air of detachment. When Sheila turned, glad to escape from the staring eyes of the other boatfuls, he fell into step by her side.

"Sandy always gets his way." He threw the remark into the air. "Never saw such a chap! His life's a series of adventures." He slouched as he walked, his hands in his pockets, his saturnine face slightly averted. He was not at all her idea of a poet, Sheila decided, studying him with a

frank curiosity. "*He* gets all the copy he wants." His voice was full of morose envy.

"Copy?" She did not understand.

He explained grandiloquently, with a wave of his bony hand:

"Material for literature."

"Well, can't you use it?" she asked gaily.

"No, of course not." He scowled at her. "Everything must be personal. Nothing outside really counts."

It sounded like Greek to the listening girl.

"Do you mean that you only write about things that actually happen to yourself?"

He hedged.

"Well, more or less. One has to suffer to feel deeply."

Sheila laughed.

"Toothache, for instance."

He gave her an injured sidelong glance.

"I take my work seriously." Too seriously, she thought. Suddenly he met her eyes. His mouth twisted and he chuckled. "That is, when I'm in the mood."

"And it's gone at present?" she asked, amused.

"Hopelessly. I tread on air. The effect, I suppose, of seeing you trying to tread on the water."

They were crossing to the landing-stage. She threw back over her shoulder:

"You wouldn't have held out a finger to save me!"

"I shouldn't. I was born lazy. Besides, I've never seen anyone drown; it would have been such stunning copy."

"But not 'personal,'" she mocked. "You'd far better drown yourself."

"Happy thought! As a matter of fact, I've committed suicide twice already." She stared. He added slowly, "On paper."

"What did it feel like?"

"A mistake. I'd sacrificed my genius for a world too trivial to care."

They stood on the long stretch of boarding.

"*Look!*" He pointed, as his friend turned the corner of the backwater and advanced in their direction. A sudden joyous laugh broke from him, so full of the gaiety of youth that Sheila was caught by the infection. "Look at his *legs*!" He rocked with mirth.

Sandy stood in a pool of water where his weight had attracted it. His trousers were rolled up to his knees, exposing a gap of white flesh above his bright silk socks. Below, the disreputable shoes splashed as he moved and swung the punt up the shallow stream with all the strength of his long reach.

"Hullo, Missing Link! Why don't you climb *up* the pole?" The poet greeted him with derision, as he slackened speed at the landing-stage.

Sheila tried to subdue her mirth.

"I'm awfully sorry. Are you wet?"

"Not a bit." He sprang out. "Let's fix this punt up, and then I suggest that we see you home in ours. We were going your way, weren't we, Pat?" He tried to catch his friend's eye.

The poet looked at him coldly. "Sandy rushing things as usual" was reflected in his expression. Out aloud he said blandly:

"Where's 'home'?"

"The house with the gables—just before the Cleeve woods."

Sandy did not look at the girl, who was feeling rather awkward. Here was a man who met her half-way in her attitude of boyish friendship. She found it a little disconcerting.

"Thanks, but I'll walk across the fields. I have things to see to, first, in Goring."

Sandy was no whit taken aback.

"You'd rather walk?" he asked, smiling.

She nodded her head.

"All right." He stooped down and repaired the gaps between his trousers and his socks. "I forgot that I was wearing kilts. Sorry. Your punt was rather moist."

She felt suddenly convicted of a prudish ingratitude.

"I know. You've been most awfully kind." She paused. "If you're really going my way, after all, I'll accept that lift. It's much nicer on the water."

The poet smiled in his sleeve. He knew Sandy's methods by heart.

"We shall be delighted, shan't we, Pat?"

"Charmed. I can't punt, you know."

"*Won't*, you mean." Sandy laughed. He turned to the boatman who had appeared from a recess sacred to storage.

To Sheila's surprise her new friend took the blame upon himself for the condition of the punt. "He is a sport," the girl decided as she heard him say carelessly:

"See here, I've made a thorough mess of this boat. Can you turn her out and get the cushions dried, somehow?"

"Yes, sir." The man nodded.

"About fetching her?" asked Sandy, turning to the real culprit.

"I'll come up early to-morrow morning." She gave him a grateful glance.

"I doubt, miss, if she'll be ready." The speaker prodded the soaking cushions with the end of a paddle.

"In the evening then, at six o'clock?"

"That 'ud be better," the man agreed. "It's Mr. Travers' punt, ain't it?"

"Yes."

Sandy noted the name.

Sheila glanced up at the clock.

"I've got to send a telegram. I shan't be long."

"We'll be here. With a dry punt." He smiled at her. "Don't hurry. There's loads of time."

She went off with her free stride.

"You're a nice one," said the poet. "In the heat of the day, when we'd planned to lie low in the nearest backwater. And you know that I simply loathe flappers."

"Well, you can go to sleep," said Sandy. "I'm not anxious in the least that you should play an active part." He wheeled round and watched the girl swing into the high road.

"How did you know where she lived?"

"Guessed it," said Sandy coolly.

The poet whistled. His friend laughed.

"She's a sporting kid." He turned away and gave orders for his punt. "I think I shall run up to the *Miller* and change these shoes. They're confoundedly wet."

"Yes, go and prink yourself out." Pat had the last word.

Sheila met her rescuer emerging from the little hotel as she came down from the post office.

"Finished shopping?" He greeted her gaily. "Would you like a ride to the river?" He pointed to a porter's barrow—from which luggage had been removed—standing empty by the kerb.

"You get in." Her eyes sparkled.

To her inward surprise he obeyed her, sitting cross-legged on the laths, his back pressed against the rail of rusty iron, his face mocking.

"I'm heavy." His voice was provocative.

She saw that he was daring her. Nothing would have stopped her now! Before he could move she seized the handle, tipped up the barrow, and, with a shove that made him grip the dusty sides, started off with her burden.

The road sloped, smooth as glass, baked by the hot sunshine. This helped her at first, lightening the load, but presently the position changed. The barrow was running away with her. Sandy threw back his head and roared. He saw the dismay upon her face, but he did not know the full reason. Coming down from the bridge was a milk-cart with a young horse. It had to pass a miller's wagon, which blocked the larger half of the road and left the barrow no room to pass.

Sheila, to avoid collision, turned sharply to the right into a short carriage drive where, luckily, the gate was open. With a crash the whole thing turned over, shooting Sandy into the hedge and sending the girl sprawling. He picked himself up ruefully, undismayed but aware of the thorns.

"I say, are you hurt?"

"Not a bit!" She was on her feet, rocking with laughter.

"I couldn't help it—I couldn't *really*! It was either that or the cart. I'm trying"—she choked—"to apologize."

"You needn't. It was my fault." He looked at her admiringly. Then his face suddenly sobered. "You've cut your hand!" A smear of blood showed upon the sunburnt skin.

"It's only a scratch."

"Let me look?"

"No." She pulled out her handkerchief and tried to wrap it round her knuckles.

"That's much too small. Have mine." He produced a clean one from his pocket, folded it across his knee into a bandage, and held it out. "Be a sport and let me do it. Later you shall extract my thorns—some of them! That's fair play."

She laughed. How well he understood her.

"Thanks." She watched his neat fingers perform this act of charity.

His copper-coloured head was bent as he leaned down over his task. She could see where the line of sunburn vanished, leaving the skin of his well-shaped neck white and smooth, with the curious lustre peculiar to auburn people. She felt oddly drawn to him. She could not define the impression. It seemed to her she had known him for years as she knew Rex or some one dear. When he looked up at last, anxious—for he blamed himself for the escapade—he surprised the tenderness in her eyes, of which she was herself unconscious. He gave her a keen, thoughtful glance.

"Is that all right? Not too tight? You must bathe it later. There's gravel in it." He spoke rather jerkily.

She nodded her head, suddenly shy. A restraint fell upon the pair. Soberly they turned and walked down to the river, side by side, forgetting the barrow, which stood rooted, with an air of amazement, in the hedge.

CHAPTER III

IT seemed to Sheila, after this day, that Sandy slipped unconsciously into the place of the absent Lance. But although their friendship ripened quickly, it held a subtle difference. For Sandy's was a different nature, and he had an experience that counted. He would never have courted a rebuff like the impetuous youth from Sandhurst. He watched the girl, with twinkling eyes, as she "showed off" like a happy schoolboy, and gloried in her love of sport. He listened to her theories, and, instead of any argument, accepted them as her rule of life. He met her half-way in her scheme of friendship, and this, at first, delighted her. Here was a playmate who understood that a girl of her calibre did not require "all sorts of stupid attentions." He flattered her by his hearty praise of her efficiency at games, and solemnly vowed she was his equal.

Pat looked on with a grim smile. At times, in private, he rounded on Sandy. For he saw from the start how things were shaping. Sandy was "up to his old games," and although the poet mistrusted girls, this one was a "jolly kid." Far too jolly for Sandy's purpose.

He watched for the first symptom of trouble, and found it in her restlessness. Sheila was missing the undercurrent of unselfish devotion that had flowed through her old intercourse with Lance. Sandy was masterful and assured. He could not be moved by her displeasure. He took her lightly at her word.

"Too hot to paddle? All right. I'll manage alone. You go to sleep." When she closed her eyes he flirted elsewhere.

But this was the affair of days. At first she was ideally happy.

Mr. Travers had met the trio as the girl got out by the ferry-house. He heard the story of their adventures, and invited the young men up to lunch. To Sheila's surprise it transpired that her new friend was a baronet, the nephew of a Sir Reginald Hinkson, late director on a board of which her father had been chairman. This was a link between the men.

The poet's name was Patrick Ryan. He was a briefless barrister. The two had been at Oxford together, and were slowly making their way up the river to revisit old college scenes. Yet as the sunny days slipped by they showed no signs of moving on, but settled down at the *Miller of Mansfield*, or, as Sandy remarked, "slept there." The Gate House was where they lived.

Mrs. Travers openly lost her heart to the young man, a little bewildered by his friend, whom she "mothered" with a secret conviction that he was not "quite responsible." She believed he had "overgrown his strength," and that his strange and varying moods arose from a weakness of the nerves.

But Sandy was an acquisition. He had the gift of making himself at home at once in a house that pleased him, and his energy was infectious. It carried the other visitors in a gay movement towards the few and simple amusements the river afforded. He was useful, too, in other ways, anticipating his hostess's wishes, invariably cheery and attentive. Unlike Lance, he did not show any outward hesitation when Mrs. Travers would suggest his taking command of a boatful where Sheila was not included.

The girl felt the difference, but refused to analyse it. She would not admit to herself that friendship was not as close a tie as love, when it came to comparing the two men. Lance had been "ridiculous"! Sandy was full of "common sense." When the latter was not by her side she fell back upon the poet, who provided her with much amusement as he swayed between his principal moods, that of a disillusioned dreamer and a mischievous materialist. Cara and Captain Craik were

gone, and the party had dwindled down again, after a fortnight of crowded rooms, to the family and one guest, an entertaining widow of forty. To the amusement of all concerned Pat had suddenly fallen a victim to the lady's mature charms.

Mrs. Frost "loved boys"—admitted the predilection frankly. The poet's devotion, which showed itself in days of public adoration and intervals of lonely sulking, was too patent to be ignored. It drew from Sheila's mother a protest. She could not bear to see him suffer, and upbraided the laughter-loving widow who teased the boy yet led him on, much amused by her latest conquest. But she kept him firmly in his place and, whenever he ventured a step too far, adopted a maternal pose. It galled the poet, unaware that his was the obvious advantage, with all the vigour of his youth, on the sunny side of the gulf dividing him from middle-age.

Sheila scoffed at them openly. She discussed the situation with Sandy one late afternoon in the garden.

"Why can't they be good friends?"

"Like ourselves." He nodded his head. "I agree with you. Love's a mistake." Stretched on the lawn at her feet he watched the girl with a sleepy smile. The dark shadow of the cedar made her look a little pale, robbing her cheeks of their rich colour.

Her eyes were fixed on the narrow arbour, at the end of the lawn. It was thrust back into a glossy hedge of laurels that clipped the gabled house on each side.

"They've quarrelled again." She frowned as she spoke.

Pat had emerged from this retreat, his hands in his pockets, his face dark. A ripple of laughter followed him. He advanced towards the pair on the grass. Sandy greeted him with a quotation:

> "'Let us give up, go down, she will not care
> Though all the stars made gold of all the air'—

Air, you know, old chap, not hair." Mrs. Frost was a brilliant blonde.

"And you think that's funny?" The poet scowled.

Sandy glanced at Shéila and winked. Pat, in his loose-limbed way, sprawled up against the cedar.

"If I'd been God"—his voice was bitter—"I'd have made Eve a charwoman. Something useful, not ornamental."

Sandy prepared to enjoy himself, and added fuel to the flame.

"Man has corrected the mistake. There's nothing to beat a good cook."

Sheila stiffened at the insult.

"If it hadn't been for Eve——" she began and broke off. "You hadn't the pluck! You'd have lived there for years and years and never thought of eating the apple."

"And we shouldn't have had tailors' bills—nor clothes at all. What a joy! Nor to work——" He gave a sleepy yawn. "It's very unfair, when you think of it, that because of a woman's thirst for knowledge we should have to labour all our lives to support a sex that's let us down."

Sheila disdained reply. She smoothed the folds of her starched skirt, in the low deck-chair where she sat. It seemed to have shrunk in the wash. Sandy's eyes were fixed on her ankles. Of late she had become conscious of any defect in her appearance. She detected a smear on her white shoes and fidgeted; then checked the impulse to tuck her feet out of sight. Dress? What did dress matter? The thought was followed by another. Lance had never criticized her.

"I refuse to support any woman," Pat declared, with morose triumph. "It shall be the other way about. I'm looking for a George Sand to whom I can play de Musset. An Egeria—with a banking account!"

Sandy interrupted him.

"And you'll be the first to marry, my son. Some rabbit-faced little creature without a sou who worships you and can't even scan your verses. I don't blame her!" His face was wicked. "You'll have a large family, with teeth that walk in front of them and look eager for lettuces, and you'll live on porridge and Dutch cheese. That's your horoscope—to a T!"

But Pat's attention was diverted.

Mrs. Frost had left the arbour. With a cushion tucked under one arm and a book and sunshade in her hands, she was sauntering down the gravel path in the direction of the river. She wore a pensive, absorbed expression, her eyes lowered. She did not look at the little group beneath the tree, but when she came to the boundary line where the lawn infringed on the flower garden she gave a startled exclamation, the book slipped from her grasp and fell on the path at her feet. Then she glanced over her shoulder. The poet was after her like a shot.

"That's done it!" Sandy chuckled. "Isn't he a dear old ass?"

"I think they're perfectly idiotic." Sheila's voice was a shade too emphatic. She had felt a slight twinge of pity which had puzzled her. Why pity the boy?

"Some people don't believe in platonics. But *we* do." Sandy spoke with the utmost cheerfulness.

"Rather!" She watched the pair continue their way to the river. Pat had the cushion under his arm. When they came to the lumpy meadow the widow stumbled. The man's hand slipped under her crooked elbow and remained there as they strolled on, their shoulders grazing, their heads turned in the direction of each other.

"That's what I like about our friendship." Sandy was studying Sheila's expression. "I can treat you like another man. It's so refreshing—rather rare."

She nodded her head. For the first time she did not quite appreciate his acceptance of her theories. She had watched Sandy with other girls. Against her will, she had observed that her abnegation of the rights of her sex to chivalry had resulted in a loss of attentions—bestowed elsewhere! Sandy never attempted to help her when she lowered herself into a punt. He never suggested that the dew on the lawn might "soak her little shoes," and he never—she thought she was glad of this—stooped to the barest form of flirtation. He called her "Mate" in their excursions. This was his only term of endearment! But she knew from his careless con-

versation that women had played a large share in his adventurous young life. Pat's chaff had opened her eyes to the fact that Sandy had achieved a reputation, even at college, for attracting the opposite sex, and that since he had come in for his title he had been the mark for matchmaking parents. What puzzled her most when, stealthily, she questioned the unsuspicious poet regarding the names that cropped up was that they were all of married women. And there was Pat, with Mrs. Frost—why didn't *girls* appeal to them?

Sandy sat up and clasped his knees.

"Do you know we've been here three weeks? Must be moving on soon."

An odd sensation stole over Sheila, a little shiver that rose to her throat. Instinctively she put up her hand to her childish bosom, pressing down this new and bewildering throb of emotion.

"To—Oxford?" The question was an effort.

"Yes." He picked up a blade of grass and bit it with his strong white teeth. "I'm off to Scotland later on for some shooting—all over the place—and it limits the time for our river trip. Pat was so awfully keen upon it. But now——" He shrugged his broad shoulders with a jerk of the head towards the meadow and the pair half concealed from view by a pink parasol that covered two heads. "If Pat won't come, I shall go on alone. I hate turning down a plan." He glanced sideways at the girl. "When I start a thing I see it through."

She nodded her head indifferently, her eyes still on the straying couple.

"That ostrich-like procession there annoys me." Sandy frowned. "The sun's setting, there's no need for that pink advertisement of their state. Love should be a sealed thing, kept in check until——" He paused, leaving the rest of the phrase unfinished. "It's getting a bit chilly here. I vote we go for a walk."

He rose to his feet and stretched himself, his sinewy arms over his head, every line of his young body taut yet supple

with perfect health. His coat lay on the grass beside him. In his soft shirt she could see the muscles ripple with the prolonged effort, and the downward slope of his lean ribs that were yet broader than his hips above his long, straight legs. He looked sinuous as a panther, with the same concealed air of strength, and his face was slightly arrogant under his smooth, tawny hair.

"Come along!" He seized her hands and swung her out of the low seat. "I'll race you to the ferry-house and give you a start from the garden gate."

"No. It's too hot." She felt limp, still in the power of this unknown mood that paralysed her energies.

"You're not going to tell me that you're tired? You'd never admit to any weakness." It was said with a slightly mocking inflexion.

"Would *you*?" She resented his teasing voice.

"I may." He slipped a hand through her arm carelessly. "Why, you're burning! You haven't caught a chill, have you? If so, we'll walk it off. That's the best cure, Mate." He shortened his stride to suit hers. "Nothing like exercise! When I was in Hungary last year——" She looked up, rather surprised. "Oh, I've been all over Europe. I ran across a delightful woman in Budapest, and her husband asked me to their place to shoot." He started off on a long flow of sporting reminiscences. Through it all, like a silver thread which she caught at and missed, was a hint of adventure connected with the Hungarian countess, who "never walked out with the guns. Not she! Wise woman. Stayed at home and was there to receive us when we returned at the end of the day—knew the value of a contrast."

"Was she pretty?"

"Well—yes." An odd smile curved his lips. "Not in the English way, you know. The most feminine thing on earth."

Again Sheila's theories crumbled. A flash of insight rewarded her. Was this why Sandy avoided girls? English girls with their sporting habits. But the man had swerved to another topic: his first impressions of the East in a

yachting trip with some London friends. This lasted him till they reached Cleeve woods. They climbed up the steep incline and turned to the right along the path trodden by Lance in his day of despair. The sun was balanced like an orange, sliced in half, on the rim of the hills that enclose Pangbourne above the river. Soon it would be blotted out and the earth would open her arms to the night. It was dark under the serried trees, and Sheila gave a little shiver.

"It's getting late." She hesitated.

"Nonsense! Afraid of bogies?" Sandy laughed. Slipping his hand down her arm he sought for hers and enclosed it lightly. "There! Hold tight and you'll be safe. If Pat were here he'd hunt for dryads. He had an awful scare one night in some thick woods beyond Hurley. He was staring up into the branches, muttering as he went along in one of his poetic frenzies, and he saw a face peer out at him through the leaves with a pair of fierce green eyes. He turned and bolted for his life. I nearly split my sides laughing! It was a wild cat, roosting there, ready for its night's hunting. Poor old Pat! How I pulled his leg."

She smiled. Her laughter seemed to have fled. She could not rid her mind of the thought that the end was at hand, their friendship over.

He went on in his musical voice, which seemed deeper than ever to-night.

"He'd be wise if he stuck to his dryads. Better for him than Mrs. Frost. I must find a counter-irritant! Pat's looking played out. And he's such a duffer at the game; he sits down to be bullied. I wouldn't stand it from any woman, but Pat's hampered by being fastidious. Of course women realize it and take advantage of his scruples." He checked himself, suddenly aware of the girl's puzzled expression. "Cheer up! He'll recover. He loves to wallow in tragedy. It's a part of his Celtic nature. Whereas you and I, my dear"—he pressed the hand in his own—"take the wine that the gods offer. I'm feeling uncommonly thirsty to-night." He paused in his stride. his face strained.

"*Sheila?*" She recoiled, startled, as he stooped his head down to hers. "Yes. I *must*! You can't refuse it." He had loosed her hand, his arms went round her. "Just one. You're driving me mad!"

"*No!*" His lips grazed her hair as she swung herself sideways evading him, her instinct blindly guiding her. But she could not free herself entirely from the grasp of those masterful hands. "I *hate* you! Let me go!"

"You don't hate me. I know better." He could feel her trembling. Merciless, he put forth the whole power of his will. "Look at me!" Fighting against it she raised her frightened, childish eyes. "Ah!" His mouth closed on hers —for a second that seemed an eternity. Then the spell was snapped. As he weakened, with a shamed cry she broke away.

"I'll never speak to you again! I loathe you." She stamped her foot, drawing a hand desperately across her lips, crushed by his passion. "I—I——" Words failed her. The tears welled up into her eyes; she turned sharply and started to run, stumbling over the dusty path where the roots of the trees formed little ridges.

He did not attempt to follow her but stood there, thinking deeply. The fire had died out of his face. After a minute he held out his hand and studied it with scornful amusement. It was shaking from the finger-tips to the joint of his well-turned wrist.

"Fool!" He felt for his cigarettes and lit one, inhaling deeply. Unlike Lance, he was free from any sentimental scruple. "I should love a drink," he said to the night.

The thought stirred him into action. At a leisurely pace he retraced his steps. The darkness seemed to hem him in threateningly. He rebelled against the subtle feeling of correction. Ridiculous! It couldn't hurt her. What was a kiss to a girl?

The wind moaned through the firs that were dotted along the edge of the wood:

"But *this* girl? She trusted you."

"Well, she's learnt what I am now." He smiled, sardonic;

the triumph seemed hollow. "She's got to realize, some day, that a friendship between a girl and a man won't remain for ever passive."

When he reached the edge of the meadows, relieved in spirit by the light that lingered on the open country and drew faint, luminous paths across the mist that rose from the river, his eyes were caught by a patch of white on the ground at his feet —a handkerchief. It was rolled into a wet ball, soaked through with the tears of a child who had tasted the first-fruits of womanhood. He picked it up and his face changed.

"Oh, *damn*!" He drove his heel into a yielding sod of turf. Savagely he walked on.

The ferryman stood in his porch, pipe in mouth, ruminating. Sandy passed him without a glance. The man wondered.

"Like the gentry," he said to himself. "One day they're that free and easy and another you're dirt under their feet. Coming!" A shrill voice within brought a furrow between his brows.

On went Sandy, heavy-footed, by the river-bank towards the bridge and the short cut that led to Goring. On his right was the Gate House. He darted a sidelong glance at it. The garden was wrapped in a sombre silence, mysterious with its blue-black cedar. The gables rose like the ears of a rat, listening. Then an eye flashed out, a lighted window, and winked gaily, before the blind fell across it. The night seemed darker than before.

He felt, in some curious way, exiled.

. . . . . .

Twenty lagging hours had passed. The interminable day dragged on.

The night had seemed long enough to Sheila as she lay awake and stared across the white room through the open window on to a sky with indigo depths, where a moon like a feather danced tiptoe to the clapping hands of stars. But the day, under her mother's eyes—her mother who asked if she had toothache — and Mrs. Frost, slightly aggrieved, because Pat had not appeared. And Father—who *would* play tennis! The day was like a white nightmare.

A Mr. Ferguson came for lunch and the week-end, a "City friend," very dark with sleek black hair and a suspicion of Jewish blood. Sheila watched him as she played with the food, which she could not swallow, on her plate. She took an immense dislike to him. His swarthy skin made her sick, and immediately there rose up the picture of a well-shaped neck with a sharp line where the sunburn met flesh white and smooth as a child's. Would she always be haunted by Sandy? It hurt so. Did love hurt?

She recalled Lance's desperate protest and Cara sucking her pricked finger. But Cara was married. She ought to be happy.

Marriage? If Sandy really loved her that was the gateway of escape from the misery of the present. He couldn't have kissed her, not like that—her cheeks burned at the memory—unless he had meant what Lance had meant. And Lance had only kissed her fingers. The test, she saw, was Sandy's return. She had found the keystone on which to build the perilous tower of her fancy.

The maid took her plate away and she felt relieved that no one had noticed the untouched cutlet skilfully thrust under her mashed potatoes. She glanced across at her mother, so placid, smiling at Mr. Travers. Had they suffered, years ago, from this horrible—hunger (that was the word!)—the longing for some material sign that the loved one had not forgotten? Sandy might come in, any minute. If so, what would he say to her? Instinct supplied the missing answer. If he came back, all was well.

But if he stayed away it meant—— Her cheeks went pale under their tan. It was like Mrs. Frost and Pat! What had he called it? A "summer flirtation."

But he shouldn't have kissed her. It wasn't fair. Instantly she caught herself trying to find excuses for him. In her utter ignorance of passion she was bewildered by the deed, though she felt in some curious way defiled. It wasn't the love that her parents shared. It lacked some quality, undefined, that would have made it serene and holy.

Her mother rose from the table with an air of resignation.

Two series of plans arranged that morning had been altered by a telegram, announcing the delayed arrival of a second guest expected to lunch. This meant that the picnic tea that day must be postponed until to-morrow. She cheered up a little when Mr. Travers said that it looked like a storm.

It was sultry under the cedar-tree, where the gnats rose in a misty spiral, and a copper gleam from the lowering sky stole across the lawn like a ribbon. Sheila prayed for the rain to come, as they sat in a wide semicircle, the men smoking, and talked idly, dulled by the heat and an ample lunch. Mrs. Frost revived slowly under Ferguson's attentions. He had the smooth, caressing manner that a confirmed bachelor so often extends to the opposite sex. He knew exactly where to stop. Mrs. Frost had measured him up. He was proof against her fascination, but she could not resist a little by-play. It helped to pass the afternoon.

Tea brought a welcome diversion. Sheila dropped a plate and broke it. Never before had she felt so glad of a scolding. It seemed to clear the air.

"It *was* clumsy! I'm sorry, mother. I'll match it when I go up to town." Her eyes sparkled. "And pay for it." She knew her parent's little weakness.

Her father gave her a mischievous glance.

"I thought the exchequer was rather low."

She was delighted at his chaff. They had noticed nothing. All was well.

"I'll pawn my watch," she declared gaily.

Ferguson laughed. This remark from a rich man's daughter was surely a jest. But she turned on him defiantly:

"I've done it before."

Her mother frowned.

"Sheila! You're not to talk like that. I hope what you say is not correct."

"Oh, I got it out." She felt reckless. "It wasn't for myself, you know, but for—some one else who was hard up." She had very nearly betrayed Rex! "Years ago—when I was a child." Her mother smiled. Sheila guessed the secret

thought, resentful in her new knowledge. "And now that I'm fair, fat, and forty——" She paused, with a slightly heightened colour, aware of Mrs. Frost's appearance, which matched the description far too well. "I'm going to behave myself," she concluded.

"Quite time too," said Mrs. Travers, her placid hands in her lap.

But her father looked at her curiously. Her gaiety seemed a trifle forced. Then he saw her give a start. The latch of the garden gate had clicked. Her hand went nervously to her breast. The odd thrill that she had felt the day before swept through her. He was coming. All her pulses quickened.

Aware of her father's serious eyes she pretended to arrange her collar.

Pat came up the gravel path. Alone! The blood ebbed from her heart. For a moment her keen sight was blurred. Her mother's voice steadied her.

"Here comes our missing poet."

He crossed the lawn with his slouching step. He appeared to be in a vile temper. Mrs. Frost hailed him gaily:

"We thought you'd tumbled into the river—fishing for naiads!"

"No such luck." His voice was morose. He shook hands with her and his hostess and nodded to Sheila. "I just dropped in to say good-bye."

"Are you going away?" Mrs. Travers asked, lifting her brows. "That's very sad." She gave him her pretty smile. "We shall miss you. Will you have some tea?"

"Thanks, if I may." He sank down in the remaining deck-chair. "That blighter, Sandy, has done a bolt—in the sailing-boat—to Shillingford. Before I was up. Yes, sugar, please. As much as you like—I'm feeling sour." He went on with his grievances. "Infernal cheek—excuse my language. Left a scrawl and all his luggage—half packed, if you please! I'm to bring them on by train, to-night, pay the bill—oh, he left money—and do all the dirty work. It's the limit. I wanted to stay here."

"It's rather sudden," his hostess concurred.

Ferguson watched the pair, amused. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the infatuated youth steal a glance at Mrs. Frost. That lady looked sphinx-like. Pat blinked and returned to his subject.

"Not for Sandy." His voice was bitter. "You don't know him as well as I do. Why, once, when we were at Monte Carlo, he had a row with a woman and played me just the same trick. Wired me the next day from *Rome*! Just when I was winning too. All the excuse he ever made was that the climate suited him better. I had to go—I was dead-broke."

Every one laughed aloud at this—it was evident that Sandy paid. Every one except Sheila. She sat there like a stone on the outside of the circle. Her father, who was on her left, drew his chair a pace forward. It screened her from the rest of the party. She did not notice the manœuvre. "Had a row with a woman!" Did his friendships all end that way?

"But this time, why do you go?" Mrs. Frost was curious.

Pat slowly shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, I don't know." He munched his cake. "It's a rum thing about Sandy. I'll admit that he's an acquired taste, but once you've got it you can't leave off."

Sheila's teeth closed on her lip. She could not stand much more. Then she heard her father's voice, over his shoulder, very distinct.

"You there, child? Just run indoors and get me a clean handkerchief. I must have left mine in the punt. It's the second drawer from the top."

She rose to her feet, rather giddy, one hand on the back of her chair.

"All right." The low spoken words seemed to come from a long way off. She heard her father add softly:

"Or send it out to me by Martha."

She slipped round behind the tree, aware of a sudden flood of relief pouring in on her troubled spirit. To be alone with her despair! Her father's eyes followed her. At the porch

she turned with a guilty glance. Had he guessed? What a darling he was!

"I shouldn't mind his knowing," she thought. "But Mother—she'd question me." She dreaded the rack of the inquisition and shivered as she ran upstairs. "And she'd blame Sandy." That finished it.

The room had a familiar smell. Of *eau-de-Cologne* which her mother used, and boots—Russia leather boots. On the double bed was a muslin cape with a knot of pale blue ribbons that her mother draped about her shoulders preparatory to brushing her hair. Across a chair was a coat of her father's. The scene formed a complete picture of harmonious wedded life. Her parents' love had stood the test of the long years and emerged triumphant.

Sheila went across to the wardrobe, a massive affair in mahogany that had followed them from house to house. Inside were shelves with drawers beneath. She pulled out one, then another, intent on finishing her mission before she gave herself up to her thoughts. They were all scrupulously neat and rather empty, displaying the care with which a man of middle-age chooses the details of his dress, disdaining the superfluity of socks and neckties beloved of youth. She found the neat linen pile by itself against a coil of collars. On the top of the handkerchiefs was a sachet, long since innocent of scent, worked in wool on frayed canvas and bound about with a penny ribbon.

She picked it up with a stifled cry. It was the labour of her hands, a relic of her kindergarten long ago in the old home, so dearly beloved, in Northumberland. Memories rose up before her; of the stitches counted so carefully and the coarse needle tightly clasped in her little warm fingers; her joy when the birthday gift was ready. He had treasured it these many years.

She stood there with quivering lips, the faded wool-work clasped to her breast.

"Oh, daddy, daddy!" The tears streamed down. Here was the spirit of faithful love.

CHAPTER IV

THE Warrior drifted downstream. He was looking proud, for a good reason. He was the father of three cygnets, and he took the credit to himself. In due course when the soft grey fluff was turning into silvery plumes they would be noted and inscribed in the Thames Conservancy Charters. It conferred on them the royal favour. He had done his duty by the Crown.

Sheila, from her empty punt, called to him as he passed. She broke a biscuit into fragments and lured him under the shady tree where the boat was moored in her favourite retreat. The Warrior, sailing up superbly, greed in his slanting glance, stretched his long neck to its limit and gobbled up the soaked pieces. Then he gave his feathers a shake, arched his wings, and was off again to spread the news among his neighbours.

She watched him go rather sadly. There were dark shadows under her eyes, the result—so her mother stated—of giving way to her nerves in the thunder-storm overnight. Inwardly Mrs. Travers had been alarmed when, in a lull between the constant heavy crashes as the lightning seemed to pierce the house, she had realized Sheila's absence and had found the girl in her bedroom, spent from the passion of her tears.

It was so unlike her gay little daughter. But young girls had these moments, she reminded herself philosophically. Would she like her dinner upstairs? Sheila welcomed the suggestion. Welcomed, too, loving arms that drew her close and a gentle kiss to pave the approach to a word of correction. She mustn't give way to her fancies. She must be brave—as Mother was—and remember that she was growing up.

Heavens—what a mockery! The girl's impulse to confide

her trouble to the older woman died as swiftly as it had been born. Mother would never understand! Possibly she might be shocked. The thought of this was an added horror. For a determined ignorance of the sin and sorrow of the world does not lead to sympathy. It is at best a negative virtue.

She had heard her father's anxious voice, cautiously, through his dressing-room door.

"Well?"

And her mother's placid reply:

"It's the storm. I think it's upset the child. It used to affect me the same way. Would you like to have a word with her?"

"No. I think she'd better rest." A pause. "Tell her I want her to come for a ride with me to-morrow morning. The cob needs exercising. That will blow her headache away." A clever suggestion. He hoped to stir from its drugged slumber her love of sport.

She had found, as her father had prophesied, that the cob was unusually fresh. When they came to Goring Heath it resolved itself into a conflict between the will of rider and mount, her father watching with a smile from the back of his powerful horse.

At the end of it their eyes had met.

"You'll win through. You've plenty of pluck." It was as near an understanding of her state of mind over Sandy as he would permit himself. She nodded her head. No need for words. They talked lightly of other matters. But when she prepared to spring down before the porch, to her surprise he anticipated her careless action, and with a smile stretched up his arms as if she had been the weary mite of that hunting adventure long ago. She let him lift her from the saddle. Still full of life and vigorous he did it easily, holding her, for a moment, closely in his embrace. In some odd way it soothed her nerves—the tenderness of this strong man. For the first time in her girlhood she felt a longing for protection: to be saved not only from outside dangers but the impulse of her own heart.

After this they played tennis, three sets of hard singles, whilst Ferguson and Mrs. Frost looked on with the other guest, a pretty girl with a dazzling complexion and no intention of offering it up as a sacrifice to the midday sun. Mrs. Travers, basket on arm, a sunshade over her graceful head, was cutting flowers for the table in her leisurely way. More than once she paused to expostulate.

"You'll kill the child! It's much too hot." She disapproved of her husband's conduct.

But the man knew what he was doing. Physical exercise could not hurt her. It was better for Sheila than mental strain. He was tiring out her vigorous body. He wanted her to sleep that night.

At lunch-time an invitation came from a neighbouring house to tea and croquet. It was accepted by Mrs. Travers for herself and her party, though it dislocated the "breakfast plans." At the last moment Sheila demurred. Her father found an excuse for her.

"Tired? I don't wonder. If I were you I'd take the punt down to the woods and curl up there, with a book, in the shade."

She gave him a grateful glance.

"May I, mother? I do feel limp."

Mrs. Travers hesitated. It was Sheila's duty to help her in amusing the guests. Then she caught her husband's eye. He nodded and smiled. She stooped to his will.

"I suppose so." It was grudgingly said. "I warned you this morning over the tennis, but when you want to do a thing you never listen to my advice."

To her surprise the girl was humble. Her independence had been shaken.

"I know. I'm sorry."

The mother's face lightened, warmed by her pretty smile.

"You're a naughty child! Go along with you and don't get into any mischief." There was love in the way she smoothed into place a rebellious lock of the girl's dark hair.

Mischief? Sheila recalled the remark as she watched the

Warrior sail away. Would she ever again feel in the mood for the escapades of the past? She closed her eyes wearily. The glare from the water beyond the tree filtered through the drooping leaves and her eyelids were heavy; they still pricked from the salt tears overnight. Her body, too, was like a log in the reaction from the glow induced by vigorous exercise. She felt drowsy, too tired to think.

In the woods behind, pigeons were cooing. The soft lullaby joined the refrain of the stream lapping against the punt. From under the bank a water-rat, shiny and wet, stole furtively to a jutting root of the willow. There he paused and, with beady eyes, peered at his human enemy. Sleep had overtaken her, the deep and dreamless sleep of exhaustion.

The rat sat up and shampooed his whiskers. Then, as he heard the dip of oars, he slipped down into the water and swam to a darker hiding-place. A cheery boat-load swung past with the laughter of girls, and men's voices, but nothing could disturb Sheila as she lay outstretched on the long cushions, her head pillowed on her arm. It needed some stronger force than this to draw her up from those misty depths. Yet, when it came, it was not a shock; it seemed the climax of a dream.

For as she stirred she became aware of a presence, human and comforting; of a warm shoulder where her head, with its ruffled hair, rested securely. Beneath her ear she could catch the throb of a strong heart; a voice whispered:

"Lie still. You're safe—I won't kiss you. I promise you. Not unless——"

She became aware of an arm around her that held her lightly but tenderly.

"*Sandy!*" Her eyes opened wide. All the joy of life returned in a sudden overwhelming flood. They gazed at each other wonderingly. Much was said in that silent moment.

Then her reasoning powers awoke. He saw the swift change in her face. It prepared him for her movement of protest.

"No!" He checked her, masterful. "You must listen

first. I've come back, because I couldn't stay away. I fought it out, inch by inch. I can't get on without you, Sheila. I'm in earnest—I swear it—deadly earnest. I'll never let you slip again. Say you love me?" His voice shook.

She could not answer, but into her eyes came a tenderness that was deeper than words. He felt her resistant body yield. He bent his head, then checked himself.

"Give me permission?" He spoke hoarsely. "I promised I wouldn't until you did."

Her hands slipped up around his neck unconsciously; she raised her face.

He released her at last, crushed and breathless.

"Oh, *Sandy*!" She gave a gasp.

"Sorry, darling." He laughed aloud. The long strain was at an end. "It's your own fault. You're rather—sweet." He lifted her little brown hand. "What size do you take for a wedding-ring? Threes or fours—or is that shoes?" Then his face sobered again. "We'll be married as soon as ever we can, won't we? I hate a long engagement."

Here was Sandy "rushing things" in his old way. She looked shy.

"Oh, I don't know." To her it seemed that an engagement was quite enough of an event for one day.

It amused her lover. He was so sure he would have his own way in the matter.

"Well, *I* do." He ran his fingers down her arm with a lingering touch. "It's so smooth and cool—like a child's!" He slipped lower in the punt. "Last night I dreamed of this—and then I woke and you weren't there. I nearly went mad. I couldn't sleep, so I got up and walked down to the river. It was just dawn. Every leaf and blade of grass was glittering with the dew. I was so unhappy, and restless, and hot, I thought I'd bathe. So I dived in. I forgot the weeds. They nearly had me." He smiled grimly.

Sheila shuddered.

"Oh, Sandy, how *could* you? You know the river." The warm colour ebbed from her face.

He was staring ahead absently.

"It was a queer experience. They say that a drowning man goes through all the past scenes of his life. *I* didn't." His lips tightened. "I'd one regret. It concerned you. It made me fight for all I was worth."

"What was it?" she asked, curious.

"Ah——" He gave her a baffling smile. "So then, when I managed to get free and reached the bank, I sat down and thought things out. I saw clearer. You know"—he moved restlessly—"I've been rather a rotter, old lady. I've lived—well, like most men. But there comes an end to all that. I crossed the Rubicon last night." He was talking more for himself than for her. The girl watched him, faintly puzzled. "I'm going to make you a good husband. Now let's talk of something else."

She did not understand that the speech had been in its essence a confession. Most of its import failed to reach her except the substance of the adventure. Childishly she pressed for more.

"But how did you get here—this afternoon?"

He stirred himself.

"Alas for Romance!" His eyes twinkled. "I took the train. I wanted to fly to you straight away, but there was old Pat, confoundedly sulky. So I played about with him for a bit and gave him the slip after lunch. Besides, I didn't want him to guess. Not until I felt sure that a certain desperate young spitfire——" She protested at this. "Oh yes, you were. I thought you were going to smack my face when I kissed you in the woods."

They could afford to laugh at it now, and her spirits rose, reaching the heights of happiness over her secret conclusions. He had meant it then. He had played fair; in love with her all the time. She had not understood in the least the hidden clause in his confession, nor that if she had stooped to flirtation Sandy would never have faced marriage. Her innocence had achieved more than the practised skill of a worldly woman. She began to enjoy the sense of her power.

"Well, I haven't promised to marry you yet. You take such a lot for granted!" She moved away to the edge of the punt with a mischievous smile.

Sandy chuckled.

"Be careful! I shan't ask you again. It's my first proposal and my last."

"Is it?" Her voice was a trifle breathless.

"Honour bright." He looked amused.

"And you've never loved anyone before?"

"Good heavens!" He saw the reason now for her simple questioning. "My dear girl, do you know my age? You can't believe that I've knocked about all these years without adventures!"

"N—o." Her face clouded over. She realized that the present was hers but she held no claim upon his past.

Sandy's arm came across.

"There's a dreadful draught in this punt. Come back! Your beloved's catching a chill. That's better." He drew her close and kissed the warm curve of her throat. "To think, if I hadn't been a fool, I might have done this days ago." He pillowed his head on her shoulder. "Mate, what about your father? I want to get things properly settled. Do you think I can go up and see him to-night?"

"You mean—about me?" Her eyes widened.

"No, of course not. About a horse!" He chuckled. "What a goose you are! Do you think I can carry you off in the punt without any explanation?" The thought pierced his outer control. "I wish to God that I could—to-night! Let's do it! Come away with me! To Shillingford—it's a dear little spot—ideal for a honeymoon. I've a room that looks down on the river, with roses that tap against the window, and the lawn's so still. With great trees, in a circle, that cut off the whole world. Wouldn't you like it?" He watched her face. "Just you and I—alone—together."

"Yes—I don't know." Dimly she saw a shadow that lurked behind his words. "How absurd! Of course we couldn't." She spoke in her old boyish way.

He gave an odd little sigh, half vexed, half amused.

"All right. We'll postpone the adventure." He sat up and glanced at his watch. "I'm going to punt you back now and see if I can get hold of your father. But I want my reward first for my exquisite behaviour. I haven't kissed you for ten minutes." He glanced under the archway of leaves, aware of voices nearing them. "Bother this boat! We'll wait till it's passed."

Sheila watched his averted head, which was bent to spy on the intruders. A memory swept over her that was to haunt her throughout her life. Yielding to a sudden impulse she put up her hand and touched his neck. He turned swiftly.

"What is it?"

It was her first unasked-for caress, and she coloured, confused.

"Only—I like it. Just *there*. It's so funny, that line where the sunburn ends."

"Kiss it, then." He leaned across her.

Shyly she obeyed the request. He shivered under the soft lips, light as the wing of a butterfly.

"I expect it tickled you." She laughed.

"You blessed infant!" He caught her up, then as suddenly released her. "It's all right. I'll go and punt."

He spoke so jerkily that she wondered. What had she done to offend him? She watched him pull up the heavy pole, half submerged in the mud, with a single jerk. How strong he was!

"Look out for your head!" He bent double on the first stroke and they slid out on to the dazzling water. "Now, time me," he laughed back. "We'll be at the ferry in five minutes."

"Seven. You can't do it under." She was relieved by his change of manner.

"I'll bet you a fiver." They were off. The punt leaped like a live creature under the swing of his powerful arms.

"I can't. I haven't a penny left!" She made a doleful grimace at him.

"Don't make me laugh. It isn't fair."

She choked down her rising mirth. Here they were back on the old plane, yet with a subtle understanding. She watched him with admiring eyes and the secret triumph of possession. Hers! What a gorgeous adventure!

Mr. Travers, strolling along the river bank, deep in thought, was met by a spectacle strange and confusing. A punt that raced an invisible crew, propelled by a tall and strong young man in a perfect frenzy of energy. The last gleam of the setting sun lingered on his smooth head, burnishing it to a vivid copper. There was no mistake! It was Sandy. And facing him—Mr. Travers stared—was Sheila, arms locked round her knees, body bent forward after the manner of an ardent and helpful coxswain.

"Go it!" Her voice rang with joy. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes shone. A telltale lock of dark hair floated out on the breeze.

The father came to a sudden halt.

"Confound him! He's come back." He felt the impotence of a parent who has no valid excuse for shutting the doors of his house against a man whom he mistrusts but who bears the best social credentials, and has given no reason for such an action.

He turned swiftly and strode back to meet the pair at the landing-stage. One glance at their faces told him all; but it did not relieve the weight on his heart.

"He's not the man I should have chosen. He's not steady enough for Sheila." This was his private summing-up. Outwardly he was quiet and courteous. They chatted on indifferent subjects until they reached the garden gate.

"You're coming in?" he asked Sandy.

"Thanks." The young man squared his shoulders. "If you could spare me a few minutes, I would like a talk with you—alone."

Their eyes met. Mr. Travers nodded.

"Certainly." In the word was a veiled hostility.

It roused in Sandy both pride and rebellion. He knew his own worth in the eyes of the world. Damn it all! The man

should be glad to welcome him into the family. With a mischievous smile, he turned to Sheila.

"Look here, my dear, I lost that bet." He dived into his trouser pocket and produced some coins and a crumpled note. "Here you are!" He took her hand before she had time to protest, folded the crackling slip on her palm, closed her fingers over it, then deliberately stooped and kissed them.

"Oh, I couldn't take it!" Her cheeks were flaming.

She darted a quick look at her father, who was watching them with grim displeasure, aware of all that lay in the action. He thought it most unfair on his daughter.

"Why not?" Sandy smiled. "It's a square deal. I lost by a minute."

Sheila was seized by an inspiration.

"Father shall judge. We'll make him umpire. Presently," she added bravely, "after you've had your talk together. Meanwhile he'll hold the stakes." She was by the older man's side, her face wistful, so plainly anxious that he should not quarrel with her lover. "Take it, dad." Her voice pleaded.

He could not resist her loving glance. After all, if she were happy—if she'd set her heart upon this man?

"It's not intended for bribery?" The joke cost him a genuine effort.

Sandy saw it and looked ashamed. He had always respected Mr. Travers, although there was little in common between them.

"That's very sporting of you, sir. I'll abide by your decision." Something in the way he said it appealed to the other's generosity. But Sandy, too late, saw that the words might hold a double significance. "I mean, as regards the b—bet," he stammered.

His honesty was disarming. Mr. Travers' eyes twinkled.

"I understand." He opened the gate. "Shall we go to the smoking-room? It's quiet in there. Ferguson's out."

As he passed Sheila he felt his hand seized for a moment and pressed tightly. Then she slipped away from them into the shadowy kitchen garden.

. . . . . .

She heard the merry party return from their afternoon at the neighbouring house from where she stood in the cinder path, with the strong scent of mint and thyme, drawn out by the evening heat, coming in little waves towards her, and she felt a sudden desire to hide. She could not meet them—not yet!

The mulberry-tree? There was a refuge! Often in the years that were past had she climbed into its wide fork, screened by the heavy leaves. Up she went fearlessly and breathed a quick sigh of relief as she reached the old hiding-place and settled down, her feet dangling, an arm flung around a convenient branch.

Voices drifted across to her, then the garden door slammed. From the kitchen came a clatter of pots and the cook's accents, shrill and scolding. Lights began to gleam out, one by one, in the upper stories.

What a time they were, Father and Sandy! It seemed such a simple matter.

She could see the glow of the smoking-room window. Martha had taken in the lamp. Then a shadow crossed the blind—her mother's! But Mother liked Sandy. And Father? She was not so sure.

"It doesn't matter what they say, I shall stick to him," she told the tree. It creaked as she altered her position. She took it for her friend's approval. "But I don't think I'll marry him yet." She remembered her lover's suggestion. "It's such fun being engaged, and we'll have a splendid time on the river."

She did not guess that this was the point on which negotiations hung in the lamp-lit smoking-room. Mr. Travers was firm in the matter, Mrs. Travers rather tearful. "Sheila is far too young at present. She doesn't know her own mind."

Sandy thrust that aside with a smile. Inwardly he was furious. A year's engagement? Ridiculous! Three months was the limit.

After an uneven contest—for he drew Sheila's mother in, knowing her indeterminate mind and that she was biased in his favour by an early-Victorian sentimentality that inclined

her to youthful lovers—he reduced the period of probation to six months, unaware that this was the test Mr. Travers had privately settled from the first!

Then they passed to ways and means. Here Sandy had no misgivings. Although he was not a rich man, in the same sense as the one before him, he was possessed of a good income and capable of supporting a wife without seeking any favours. He made this plain from the start. His pride appealed to Mr. Travers, who had fought his own battles unaided. It was evident that Sandy's love was for Sheila herself, and not for her fortune.

Mrs. Travers interposed with all sorts of minor details and a disposition to start "planning." Sandy curbed his impatience. He knew she was a powerful ally. Since the process seemed to cheer her, her husband sat by and listened.

Meanwhile Sheila began to indulge in a gloomy rebellion shot through with fear.

The last glimmer of twilight faded. Darkness fell, with the sudden effect of blotting out all sense of perspective. The path below sank steadily, hedges dwindled and disappeared, and a row of gooseberry-bushes swelled to gigantic proportions under their netting. Sheila crouched alone with the night, between a fast-receding earth and the vast heights of the heavens above, where, far away, a star twinkled fitfully as the leaves were stirred by a rising breeze and left a peep-hole.

At last some one called through the gloom.

"Sheila! Where are you?"

"Here, dad. In the mulberry-tree." She could not move. Fear seemed to numb her limbs.

Firm steps came down the path, a shadowy form of uncertain bulk loomed up out of space.

"What are you doing there, my child?"

"I'm—waiting." There was a catch in her voice.

She felt a hand come up cautiously and close on her knee, and her courage returned.

"You *do* like him, don't you, dad?" All her heart was in the words.

"I'll tell you when you answer my questions. What does Sandy mean to you?"

"*Everything.*"

"As bad as that?" She could picture his smile, but the voice was gentle.

"You *know*! You guessed all along." It was almost defiant in its challenge.

"Well, I had my suspicions," he conceded. "You don't cry over thunder-storms. That's why I've given my consent to your engagement. On one condition."

"Yes? What?" She caught her breath.

"That you wait six months before you marry."

"Oh, I don't mind *that*!" Joy and relief swept, triumphant, into her voice.

"Sandy does." He was warning her.

"But Sandy's always rushing things! You ask Pat." In the reaction from the long suspense she laughed aloud. "I haven't thanked you. I'm coming down." There followed a scramble, a little thud, and her arms were flung round her father. "You *dear*! I knew you'd understand."

He kissed her rather gravely.

"You're quite sure, little woman?"

"Quite." The word rang with conviction.

"Then I hope you'll be very happy, my child. He's young. He'll have to settle down—you too—and face life. We all have to." She heard him sigh, regretting that her childhood was over. "It's a good match from a social standpoint, though that doesn't count with me much. Still, your mother likes it. By the way, you must be very gentle with her. It's been a great surprise, you see. As she says, you're only just out of the schoolroom." Sheila smiled in the darkness, her cheek pressed against his sleeve. "She's feeling a little wounded too, because you haven't confided in her."

"I couldn't!" The girl was indignant. "I didn't know till this afternoon. Not that Sandy really cared."

"I see."

There came a little pause. She felt the unspoken remainder.

"You mean—I could tell her about myself?" Her voice sounded a shade guilty.

"Precisely." He waited, inwardly curious, to hear her defence.

It came swiftly.

"And say that I was in love with a man who didn't care a button for me!"

He laughed. He loved her for her spirit. His daughter was flesh of his own flesh. Admit a failure, prematurely? Never! He slipped a hand through her arm.

"Well, we won't argue about it, Tommy." This was his old nickname for her, used only on rare occasions and therefore doubly endearing. "But try and understand your mother. She loves you dearly, and she's upset. Times change. In her days girls were less reticent. And now we must go back to the house. Sandy, of course, is staying for dinner—we've sent a wire to his friend. I suppose you'll want to see him first?"

They swayed up the narrow path together, between the interfering bushes, with the unsteady gait of humans, deprived of the light and unendowed with the instincts of the lower creation.

"I dare say."

Her indifference, so palpably assumed, amused him. He indulged in a quiet joke:

"You needn't, of course, unless you like. You'll see plenty of him in the future." An odd pang of jealousy stung him. "I believe you're glad to be running away. Tired of your old Dad."

"Never!" She swung round, checking him. "You're not to say that. It spoils it all!"

He heard the sound of a sob choked back, and his arms went round her hungrily.

"No, my dear. I didn't mean it."

She clung to him and felt his hand, with its square-tipped fingers, smooth back her hair and linger for a moment there. It was the touch of benediction.

"I'm a foolish old man." His voice was husky.

"You're not! You're the dearest thing on earth. I shall always want you. You, first."

He had his reward in that moment. Then his loyalty rose supreme.

"No, no—your mother first. She's waiting for you. Come along."

Hand tightly clasped in hand, they left the shadowy garden behind them.

Mrs. Travers was in the hall. The girl nerved herself to meet tears and reproaches. None came. Sandy had used his time well. He understood the older woman; they belonged to the same caste. In the interval of waiting he had struck the note of quiet restraint which remains its dominant feature. Sheila would be spared a scene. Now, with commendable self-control, he effaced himself in the smoking-room.

Mrs. Travers, tall and graceful, came forward to meet the pair.

"So, I'm to lose my little daughter? But not just yet." Her voice was calm.

Sheila would have given the world to find the right thing to say, but she felt tongue-tied and horribly nervous. She kissed her mother in dead silence. Her father looked on, perplexed.

"We'll have a little talk later." Mrs. Travers smiled sweetly. "But now it's quite time to dress. You'll want to look your best to-night."

How composed she was! Sheila felt the old subtle air of correction. Was this a form of punishment? She did not understand in the least what had happened. And where was Sandy?

Mrs. Travers slipped her hand through the girl's arm and turned to the stairs. Her voice floated down to her husband, rigid under the hall lamp.

"I think I will lend you my string of pearls. They'll be yours, some day, when I'm gone."

Sheila replied jerkily.

"It's awfully good of you. Thanks—so much."

Their steps passed along the landing, a door opened, then silence.

Mr. Travers still remained, staring up at the thick carpets.

"Well, I'm damned!" He felt betrayed. His warning to the girl had been so entirely thrown away. He could not understand his wife, nor that her love of dignity had moved her to "set an example," in defiance of her feelings.

He turned into the smoking-room, a slight frown upon his face. His prospective son-in-law stood there, tall and handsome, grave-eyed.

"Where's Sheila?" In his voice was the human touch that had been lacking in the mother's and the daughter's.

Travers unconsciously welcomed it.

"I'm sorry, Sandy. You'll have to wait. My wife has carried her off upstairs." He liked the boy for his sudden scowl. A germ of friendship quickened between them. "You'll get your innings by and by." His eyes twinkled as he spoke. "What about a sherry and bitters?"

Sandy laughed and recovered himself.

"It sounds all right." He was rather relieved by the elder man's attitude. He had passed through a severe half-hour of questioning before Mrs. Travers had put in an appearance. He felt now this was dead and buried.

"I think we ought to drink a health. I'll get up some old port to-night." Mr. Travers touched the bell.

The maid appeared and he gave the order, adding:

"If Cook can manage it, you can put off dinner for ten minutes."

"Yes, sir." Martha departed, with a furtive look in Sandy's direction. Rumours were flying about the house. She approved of "Miss Sheila's" choice.

When the door had closed behind her, Mr. Travers glanced at his watch.

"I might, you know, give Sheila a hint that you'd be down here at eight o'clock."

Sandy turned impulsively.

"Thanks." His face was eloquent.

Travers, touched, held out his hand. Sandy gripped it—a silent compact.

CHAPTER V

HAPPY days followed fast. Sandy was now at the Gate House. There was a corner found for Pat in a roomy attic under the eaves, where he pictured himself as a starving poet pouring out his soul to the stars. He told Mrs. Travers solemnly that the sloping roof helped his muse. She smiled at him in her peaceful way and hoped that he slept. Pat sighed.

For Mrs. Frost had departed for other hospitable summer quarters. Their farewell had fallen flat. Owing to a slight error in the hour of the train, Pat had found himself at the station, alone—he had stage-managed this—with the self-possessed and amused widow, for twenty minutes, during which, hemmed in by a holiday crowd, his eloquence had deserted him. They had sat on a trunk side by side and discussed—ye gods!—the harvest prospects. The world became a hideous place, and why porters were ever invented—porters who surged into you—and ticket-collectors with vile manners, interposing broad shoulders between a man and his desire, seemed an insoluble problem. Even his last fond look had been foiled by an odious individual who wanted to know if they stopped at Reading.

For a week he wrote verses to her, couched in a Swinburnian style so erotic that Sandy chuckled in reading them—and read them through.

"You get a lot of fun, old man, out of your vivid imagination. I expect St. Anthony did the same." This was his cheerful summing-up.

Pat, a trifle ashamed of the lengths to which his ardour had carried him, subsided into a milder form of morbid despair, reminiscent of Dowson.

Too reminiscent. Sandy remarked it.

"A pity you haven't the 'gift of silence' to lay at her 'unobservant feet.' It's much more likely to help you now than raptures about 'pale hands.'"

Pat squirmed. Sandy went on, with a wink at Sheila, who was laughing:

"I remember her hands: nice plump little puddies where the rings sat on little cushions."

"Oh, shut up!" Pat slouched off, regretting the impulse which had led him, with the artist's eternal craving, to seek for a word of appreciation.

Sheila ran after him, seized by a tardy repentance. Her heart overflowed with sympathy for other victims of fond adventure less fortunate than herself. Her love for Sandy had softened her.

"Pat, come back! If you like, I'll climb Streatley Hill with you." This was a long-discussed project. "Sandy has some letters to write."

For the young couple were overwhelmed by congratulations pouring in since the engagement had been announced.

The poet allowed himself to be coaxed into a more cheerful mood.

"If you like. It's a hot day."

"But you suggested it." Sheila was firm. "You said you wanted to see the view. If you're too lazy——"

He interrupted.

"I'm never lazy. Only tired."

"Like a wilting rosebud," Sandy observed, stretched on his back under the cedar. "Leave him alone to his sad young thoughts. But, for heaven's sake, don't read his verses. They've given me a pain in the pantry." He fell back, ribald, on quotation.

> "'. . . but she shall not recall
> What men we were, nor all she made us bear.'

I think I should like some old brandy."

Pat gave him a scornful glance. Then, as he caught

Sheila's expression, his mouth twitched; little wrinkles grew at the angles of his eyes; he threw back his head and laughed.

"All right! We'll go to Streatley. A pilgrimage. But I'll change my sandals—if you've no objection." He ran indoors.

"Sheila!" Sandy beckoned to her.

"Yes?" She stood, looking down at him.

"Don't let Pat flirt with you." They laughed. There was little need for the caution. "The pain's here now." He touched his lips.

She gave a quick glance behind her. No one in sight. She slipped down on to the grass and kissed him quickly.

"You're not giving a crumb to a sparrow! Lord, what a lot you have to learn!"

She was up again, flushed and smiling. He stretched out a hand and imprisoned an ankle.

"No!" She drew away from him.

"Little Snow Maiden!" He twisted sideways and pressed his lips to the narrow instep. "One of these days you'll be punished." Light words, but they came back in the darkest hour of her life. "Now, run in and change your pinny and take your boy friend for a ta-ta."

She was off, with a passing pat on his head. Sandy watched her, his smile fading.

"Rotten work, being engaged." He stretched his arms up with a yawn. "I think I'll be off to Scotland soon. The worst of it is, directly I'm there I shall want to come back to her again." He was filled with the discontent of love.

Sheila and Pat started gaily across the fields. The sky was blue, but a bank of clouds was sending forth drifting scouts towards the valley. Leaves hung motionless on the trees, the air was still, holding its breath; cows moved with a sure instinct towards the hedges that promised shelter.

The couple crossed the long white bridge and came to Streatley, a slumbering contrast to her villa-dotted, gayer sister with busy shops and railway station. In the hollow

nestled the old stone church with its pent-in graveyard under the elms. The road sloped, narrowing as they toiled up, past cottages with strips of gardens and closed windows, blocked by plants and drawn curtains.

Pat remarked upon the fact.

"It's etiquette to drape your windows against all intrusive eyes, open your door as wide as you can, and hang out all the family washing. The British spirit of bravado combined with the pride of 'keeping yourself *to* yourself'! Isn't that it?"

"I suppose so." Sheila gave her happy laugh. "But they do much the same abroad. In an Italian *loggia*, for instance."

He did not quite agree with her, but was too lazy for argument.

"You know Italy?" he asked.

"Oh yes. We spent a winter in Florence and another in Rome. It was great fun—just Mother and I and the governess. Of course I went on with my lessons, but when Father came over on his flying visits it was always a holiday. He used to take us out to dine, to the theatres, and for lovely drives. We went to Berlin and Brussels too. It was part of my education."

"But didn't you ever go to school?"

"No. Mother didn't like it. At first I used to learn with Rex. There were only two of us, you see." She spoke a little wistfully.

"You must miss your brother."

"Dreadfully. But he loves his work. He's been out in Egypt, engineering, since the beginning of the year. We'd planned to go this winter to Cairo, so as to get a peep at him. But now——" She paused and smiled at Pat.

"Sandy's gone and spoilt it all." He finished the phrase with a whimsical glance.

"That's it."

A silence followed. Pat was thinking over her story. What a sheltered life she had led! For all her little boast of travel she remained the simple insular type of healthy

English maidenhood. He disapproved of her bringing up. It seemed a poor preparation for the battles of the world. She could not remain as she was; certainly not by Sandy's side!

He shook off his absorption. They were passing a cottage, painted white, with a tangled garden where roses bloomed side by side with vegetables. Luxuriant pinks had forced their way through the box that edged the paths. To the rear was a little studio, facing the north, and some battered chairs sprawled on a patch of grass beyond. It was evidently the abode of an artist.

"I should like to be the owner of that." Pat looked at it longingly. "It has a jolly homely air. Not too tidy—just snug." As they crossed the intervening road and branched off across the fields, he went on in his leisurely way, "You know, I've really domestic tastes. If I had money I'd marry to-morrow. A nice little wife and a nice little home. And children—I love children!"

"So do I."

He glanced at her, approving this. Sandy was a lucky devil! He forgot his old objection to "flappers." Too lucky—the thought struck him. What could he offer in return? The love of Truth, which is the foundation of all real poetic impulse, stirred within him. For Pat was a poet, although his gift was not fully developed. This girl, so fresh and full of hope, to be tied to a man who had blunted his sense of the finer meaning of love by constant passionate adventures? Was it fair? He stared ahead, puzzled. Life was a rum business!

A drop of rain fell on his cheek.

"Hullo!" He looked up at the sky. "We're in for a shower. Bad luck!"

"Never mind!" She laughed back at his rueful face. "There's a wood ahead. We can shelter there until it's over."

The steep hill lay beyond it, grass-covered save where a path had been worn by constant pilgrimages. They quickened their steps and found themselves, as the rain

began in earnest, a trifle breathless but triumphant in the shade of a spreading oak. Pat threw himself down on the ground.

"Here I am and here I stays. Take a pew!"

She obeyed him, leaning her back against the trunk, her hat on her knees, her dark hair blown forward over her eyes. She brushed it back impatiently.

"I'm hot—aren't you?—and awfully thirsty. Why didn't we bring the thermos? We could have had tea here."

"It's easily remedied," Pat suggested. "When that futile cloud has emptied itself, I vote we go back to the *Swan* and refresh the inner man." There were signs of rebellion on her face, and he went on coaxingly. "Now, Sheila, don't be selfish. I'm parched and weary—and deeply in love! I refuse to go a step farther."

It seemed a good sign to Sheila that he could joke at his condition. The image of Mrs. Frost was fading.

"But we're half-way."

"All the better. We might have been at the top of the hill." His eyes were lost in merry wrinkles. "Vanity, oh vanity!" He shook a warning finger at her. "We only want to convince each other of our endurance—that's the pinch! Let's take it for granted. There's far more courage in admitting boldly that we're tired."

"'Wilting rosebuds'?" Sheila gave in.

Pat peeped at his watch.

"Well, now you're a good girl, I'll let you into my little secret. I told Sandy that he'd find us, chaperoned by a teapot, at the local pub about five. He's coming up in the punt to absorb bohea and convey us home. I couldn't walk both ways. I've been brought up delicately."

"You *are* a fraud! You never meant to get to the top of the hill at all."

"Only in dreams." Pat drew a finger down his long nose, then rudely extended the others.

Sheila thumped him on the back.

"You shouldn't do that to the 'best man.' Shall I have

to wear a frock-coat? And kiss the bridesmaids?" He looked tragic. "How I wish I'd never met you!"

The pattering on the leaves had ceased.

"Excelsior!" He stood up. "Now, will you climb the hill alone, or come to tea with me and Sandy? With watercress and jam—and wasps! Wasps swimming in amber glory. What a gorgeous death: to be drowned in jam,

> . . . 'at the very top of being,
> The battle-spirit shouting in my blood'—

That's Henley. Ever read Henley?" He caught her arm, detaining her. "Listen." His mood had changed: his face glowed with a sombre light, he waved his hand to the wide oak.

> "'The Trees—God's sentinels
> Over His gift of live, life-giving air,
> Yield of their huge, unutterable selves.
> Midsummer—manifold, each one
> Voluminous, a labyrinth of life,
> They keep their greenest musings and the dim dreams
> That haunt their leafier privacies. . . .'"

His voice trailed away into silence. Then he tucked a hand through her arm. "Like it?"

She nodded.

"It sounds so big."

"Like the man's heart." He glanced back when they emerged from the cool stillness as though he bade farewell to the wood. She heard him murmur under his breath:

> "'And frolicsome freaks
> Of little boughs that frisk with boughs.'"

He was lost again in a world of his own.

When they reached the shining river they turned to the left where the old inn, sheltered by the elms behind, blinks in the sun like a drowsy cat, gazing out on the rush-fringed weir. The purr of the mill-wheel over a stream, turned milky-white, soothed the senses. They stepped down into the Sleepy Hollow feeling the silence gather them in, relieved to find the garden empty.

Pat spoke in a whisper.

"*That* table?" His voice was mysterious. Then he laughed with a little shiver, snapping the spell. "This place feels haunted. We might be the ghosts of some long-past lovers stealing to a clandestine tryst. Whereas jam is our wild ambition!"

"Don't!"

He stared at her, surprised.

"Did it catch you too?"

She nodded her head. Slowly her eyes turned to his. They were shy and confused. He smiled at her.

"I'm glad. You're such a dear little pal." Perfect sympathy reigned between them. He had hardly expected to find in her the answering call of imagination. He wondered if Sandy had quickened it? No, it was love itself. His thoughts turned to his friend. "Shall we wait for his lordship, or order tea?"

"Well, it's early yet, isn't it?"

"Yes, we'll laze."

They sat down at the far end of the strip of lawn, Pat with his shoulders turned to the river. He wanted to gaze at the old hostel with its signboard and red-brown roof. The heavy shower had laid the dust. By the boat-house an untidy youth was busy mopping out a punt, sending little wheels of moisture flying as he twirled his weapon. A party of rooks emerged from the elms with their raucous cry and blundered across. In the oily water circles were forming where the fish rose, and near the weir a coot was playing pretty tricks, scuttling, diving, and bobbing up unexpectedly, like a Jack-in-the-box.

Sheila's eyes followed its progress dreamily. There was no need to talk to Pat. He was perfectly happy. She could give herself up to her own thoughts, which flew, like a homing pigeon, to Sandy.

From the distant reach that led to the lock, an electric launch came silently. Its faint throb reached her ear as it stole down the breakwater, and she glanced up at the occupants—two men and a woman. They looked, she

thought, a trifle bored. Across the sounding-board of the water she could catch a fragment of conversation.

"This is the place! I was quite sure I remembered it, Bertie. Isn't it quaint?" A feminine voice, with a husky sweetness that gave it a touch of personality.

Sheila stared at the speaker.

"Such a pretty woman! Do look, Pat."

He turned his head lazily. The launch slackened speed and stopped against the floating landing-stage. A tall woman stepped down with an indolent grace and shook out her skirts—crushed by the narrow basket chair—disdainfully. She revealed in the action slender ankles and beautiful feet shod with care.

Pat started.

"It can't be—— Yes, it is! It's Mrs. Lester." A scowl darkened his bony face.

"Do you know her?" Sheila was quite excited.

"Yes, worse luck!" He checked himself. "I suppose I oughtn't to say that. They've shown me a certain hospitality."

"But you don't like her," said Sheila shrewdly.

"She doesn't fit into the present picture. Too mundane for the *Swan*." He moved his chair, presenting his long sloping back to the on-coming party.

Sheila frankly examined the trio. The men she dismissed at once, well-dressed but negligible; the woman claimed her whole attention. She was very dark, with glossy hair, a pale skin, and wonderful eyes—tragic eyes, faintly pencilled. Her mouth was too red for her colouring. She moved with assurance, a step or two in advance of the others, as though she assumed her place by right.

"You can order tea," she called back. "I'm going to shake out my damp veil."

Wound about her wide grey hat was an orange scarf of soft chiffon, the ends floating loosely behind. It was a daring splash of colour that warmed her severe linen dress, which clipped her figure in perfect lines, and was in its way as meretricious as the painted lips, for it bore the mark of a simplicity that was costly.

She passed on into the inn. The men for a moment conferred together, then turned towards the little bar.

"Do tell me about her?" Sheila was curious. "She's not an actress, is she, Pat?"

"No. Not professionally." The poet looked cynical. "They live in a flat in Mount Street. I don't really know them well. I met them one year with a pal at Biarritz."

"With Sandy?" She jumped to the conclusion.

He nodded. His eyes were fixed on the river in the direction of the lock. He seemed rather preoccupied.

"Then Sandy knows her?" Sheila persisted.

Pat's face was unnaturally grave, but his lips gave a sudden twitch.

"Oh yes. Sandy knows her." He shaded his eyes with his hand against the glare. "Here he comes. Good biz!" He rose to his feet. "I'll go and meet him. No, don't you move. You keep the table, or perhaps those other people may sneak it." He slouched down to the boat-house.

Sandy punted up in style, with a wave of his hand as he saw Sheila. She watched him with secret admiration; he looked so full of youth and vigour.

"Hullo, Pat!" she heard him say.

She saw the poet bend forward and speak rather rapidly. She could not catch the conversation, beyond a sudden remark from her lover:

"What a damned nuisance!"

It puzzled her. Sandy stood erect in the punt and drew his hand over his hair. He looked annoyed and undecided. Then he caught Pat by the shoulder, interrupting the steady flow:

"That's it! Go and tell her. I'll wait. But hurry up!"

The words drifted across clearly. She wondered what the trouble was. Pat came back with his loose stride.

"I say, Sheila, Sandy's gone and made a regular mess of things. He's ordered tea at the *Miller*."

"Oh!" Her happy face clouded. "I'd far rather have it here."

"So would I. But it can't be helped. He's awfully sorry. Come along!" He fidgeted, avoiding her eyes. "He's waiting for a good scolding. But he meant it for the best." He spoke rather jerkily. The lie stuck in his throat.

"All right." She rose to her feet. As they crossed the lawn she glanced up at the open door of the inn. Mrs. Lester was standing there. She gave the girl an indifferent look, then smiled, surprised, and bowed to Pat, who promptly raised his panama. Her eyes followed the young couple, amused, but widened as they saw Sandy. His hand went out to help Sheila into the punt.

"I'm so sorry, old lady."

Mrs. Lester moved forward with a leisurely step, not in their direction but towards the margin of the river. She caught the girl's laughing reply:

"Why did you come? We didn't want you! Pat and I were enjoying ourselves."

"That's just the point." Sandy smiled. "I don't approve of the flirtation." He swung the punt pole in as he spoke, heading away from the boat-house into midstream. When he came abreast with the silent figure on the bank, for the first time he looked at her and gave a start. It was neatly done.

"Hullo! How are you?" He saluted her, his hand to his forehead, playfully, for his head was bare, his hat, as usual, flung aside. "Isn't it a perfect evening?"

"Perfect." The sweet husky voice seemed faintly amused. She glanced at Sheila. "We're at Wallingford for the week-end. At the *Lamb*—and very happy there. If you come that way, look us up."

"Thanks, I will. Bertie with you?"

"Yes—and Alec."

"The happy trio!" He laughed lightly and drove the punt forward once more. "Good night!" He swung the drops off his hand.

Pat's eyes were glued on his boots. He seemed to be finding fault with them.

A silence fell on the little party. Sheila felt a slight annoy-

ance. If these were old friends of Sandy's, why hadn't he stopped and introduced her? When they turned the corner, he explained:

"I wasn't going to let them cut in. They'd have spoilt the fun. They're too—*London*! Know what I mean?" He was watching the girl. "All right up in town, but somehow, here——" He paused, smiling.

So that was it. Sheila nodded, recalling the poet's definition: they didn't "fit into the picture."

"She's awfully pretty." Her praise was sincere.

"Oh, she knows how to dress," said Sandy lightly. "And she's been a beauty in her day."

"But she isn't old?" Sheila wondered.

"She's not as young as you, my dear." They had reached the low gabled boat-house. He helped her out and added softly, though the words were plainly audible, "Nor half so sweet as my little Sheila."

The girl gave him a swift glance full of a shy gratitude. His praise was very dear to her. Then her eyes fell on the poet. She was amazed by his expression. His mouth was closed in a tight, thin line, his nostrils dilated with anger and scorn.

"What's the matter?" she asked quickly.

Pat recovered himself with an effort.

"Kicked myself, getting out of the punt." He added, for Sandy's benefit, "The wrong person—most annoying!"

"I hope it wasn't intended for me." She thought that the poet was aggrieved by the failure of their plans and added kind-heartedly, "I'm still regretting the lawn at the *Swan*. But we'll go again, you and I, when we can get rid of Sandy."

"Do you want to?"

In her lover's voice was a touch of wistfulness, most unusual: Sheila noted it with surprise. What was the matter with them all?

For Sandy had been priding himself upon his escape from Mrs. Lester. But now the reaction had set in. He was tasting the bitterness that follows, so closely, on all illicit adventures.

She answered gaily:

"Not when you're good."

It was meant in fun, but Sandy flinched. He did not reply; his hand tightened nervously upon her arm.

Pat gave him a whimsical look, reading his thoughts. His old rancour fell away. He was sorry for Sandy. He began to talk in a cheerful strain to Sheila:

"Isn't this where you tried to break old Sandy's precious neck—or did he run away with you? I was never quite sure of that story."

They discussed the point happily as they turned into the *Miller* for tea. Pat was the life and soul of the party. But later he made some excuse and tramped home across the fields, leaving the pair to follow by water. He thought that they wanted to be alone.

His unselfish action was a mistake. It precipitated a certain crisis that was bound to occur in their relations. So far they had never quarrelled. Their love was still a faery romance, wisely screened from the world beyond. It was Sandy who let the cold wind in.

They paddled, sitting side by side in the well of the punt, till they came to the meadow where the cows wander down to drink and the bank is muddy and torn by hoofs.

"Let's go round behind the islands. We've heaps of time," Sandy proposed. "To 'Kingfisher Creek.'"

This was their name for the quiet little backwater. They steered the punt in that direction.

Sheila had been rather silent. There was something about Sandy to-day that baffled her, a subtle change, since their meeting at the *Swan*. Her mind returned to the scene, which seemed now unreal to her—like one in a play, dominated by a single leading figure. She was haunted by the woman's charm.

"Wouldn't she think it rather strange that you didn't stop?" she asked vaguely.

"Who?" Sandy sat up.

"Mrs. Lester."

So she knew the name. Bother Pat! He felt annoyed.

"No. Why should I?" He watched her closely.

"But if you're an old friend of hers——" She broke off, subtly aware that she was accusing him of discourtesy. "Shall we meet her up in town?"

"I don't suppose so. She's in a set——" The pause that followed came from his loss to explain exactly what it included. He had decided that certain friends belonging to his bachelor days must remain in the background now, or be carefully avoided. It was one of the penalties of marriage. He had a wide social circle. His position would enable his wife to see the best side of London life. He meant her to take her place there. So now, in his embarrassment, he wound up rather lamely, "I don't think she's your sort."

Sheila trailed her hand in the water and peered down into the shallows, unconvinced. Then she raised her head.

"Shall you go and see her at Wallingford?"

The steady pursuit of the topic got on his nerves, already strained. No man likes to be questioned. A wise woman will find out all she wants to know by less obvious methods.

"No." He moved impatiently. "Look here, little woman, I'd rather not discuss her with you."

This was fatal. The innocence of her curiosity turned to suspicion.

"I believe you've had a flirtation with her?" She laughed as she spoke, but in her words was a certain directness that pierced his guard.

"You're perfectly right. She's an old love. Now, are you satisfied?"

His temper had slipped beyond his control. She had asked for the truth. Well, she should have it. This was the thought at the back of his mind. But his face betrayed him more than his words.

"Sandy!" She laid a hand on his arm, startled. "What do you mean by that?"

He thought for a moment, aware of the slip, yet inclined to stand by the results, even as his anger cooled. Sheila must

not believe him to be a paragon of all the virtues before marriage, and afterwards be met with all sorts of light gossip. Some perverse instinct drove him on.

"Oh, the usual thing. Of course it's over. I went to Biarritz with her and her sister and another man. Pat joined us later. Bertie came and settled us in and then he left us in possession. I was badly hit at the time."

He gave Sheila a sidelong glance. Had she taken it in? He saw that she had. Her face was white with the sudden shock.

"But she's married." It sounded unbelieving.

"Yes—in a sort of way. I mean that Bertie's easy-going. Always has been. He's a rotter!" A sudden wave of mistrust seized him, the forerunner of remorse. "Oh, damn! Don't let's talk of it."

Silence.

Stealthily Sandy's hand stole out to hers. She drew it away with a shrinking movement, her face averted.

"I think it's—*beastly*!" Her voice quivered. "Of course one reads of things like that. In books. But one doesn't expect it from"—a pause—"people of one's own."

He was roused at last to a sense of his peril.

"Sheila, listen—yes, you *must*. You don't understand. You've been brought up in utter ignorance of the world. You know nothing whatever of men and of their temptations—how they live. Perhaps I oughtn't to have told you. But you had to learn, sooner or later. I won't pretend that it was right—in an ethical sense—but honestly, you're making a lot too much of it. I've never set out to be a saint—neither to you nor to your father."

This roused her from her stupor.

"Father knows? Knows *this*?" Her eyes widened. Her thoughts whirled round in a wild confusion, unbearable. And yet he sanctioned her engagement? All her principles were shaken.

Sandy evaded direct reply.

"Well, he knows what I am. He questioned me pretty

thoroughly—and I was honest. He's a man of the world. He didn't expect—impossibilities." But his heart sank as he watched her face. "Don't look like that! I can't bear it. I'm no worse than other men. We're all alike. Say you'll forgive me? For a past that doesn't belong to you." A faint smile curved his lips, born of his last remark. But he was filled with pity for her. What a fool he had been! Worse—a brute. He could have left her in innocence. She was such a child. He might have spared her so easily this sordid story.

"I never would have believed it of you." She spoke with a dull finality. Yet her faith in her own point of view was shaken by her father's knowledge of Sandy's failings. Was it true? Were all men bad? Rex—Lance? No! She thrust the conclusion aside. But Sandy? Sandy was different. She recognized instinctively the key to much that had puzzled her in his conversations with Pat. Sandy was lacking in principles. He obeyed the impulse of the moment, heedless of all that she held sacred. And even as she passed judgment with the merciless decision of youth, her love rose up and warped her reason. She began to frame excuses for him. He had never had a proper home, the influence of loving parents. An orphan, he had been educated in a careless fashion by his uncle, a bachelor and man of the world. He hadn't stood a fair chance. She was wavering, and she knew it.

Sandy realized it, too, with his experience of her sex. Now was the psychological moment. He slipped a masterful arm round her and drew her reluctant shoulder against him.

"Darling, I didn't mean to hurt you. Don't be hard on poor old Sandy—who loves you with his whole heart. I'll swear you'll never have cause to regret it. I've been a rotter, in many ways, but it's all over since I met you. I oughtn't to have said a word, only—I'd rather be honest with you. By and by, when we're married, you'll begin to understand. Say you forgive me? No—don't speak—kiss me, child." He had his way.

Yet a shadow remained and dimmed the glory. Something

had gone: the perfect trust. In its place rose her generous instincts. When she pardoned, she did it fully; there should be no looking back. They would live for the present, the past sealed. Her keen young brain recorded the fact that in marriage a man was master of all that lay behind his engagement, yet expected from his bride a record stainless from the hour of her birth.

The injustice of it puzzled her. In later years she recurred to the matter and sought, in vain, a remedy. For she would not admit that it was right, even with her fuller knowledge. But now she made her first surrender to the will of the man she loved. She promised him not only forgiveness but forgetfulness—which was harder!

Yet when she went to bed that night a picture rose up against the square of darkness framed by the white curtains—for heavy clouds veiled the moon, and the stars had vanished in her train—the picture of a graceful figure, alone upon the river bank, with smiling eyes that beckoned to Sandy.

Sheila buried her flushed face in the cool pillows.

"I hate her—hate her!"

A faint sense of triumph followed, childish yet born of jealousy: the possessive love of the woman. Sandy was hers—hers for life. Possibly her rival knew it?

There was comfort in the thought.

PART II

THE TOWER ROOM

CHAPTER VI

"MAY I come in? It's only Cara."

"Yes, do." Sheila's voice held a suspicion of excitement.

When her cousin opened the door she guessed the reason. A litter of garments lay on the bed beside a box from which billowed crinkled folds of tissue paper. The girl was standing before the glass in a delicate wrapper of peach-coloured silk with ruffles of lace and floating ribbons.

"How pretty!" Cara paused. "Beginning already with your trousseau?"

"Yes. You like it?" Sheila came forward and kissed the intruder, her eyes shining. "Mother saw this to-day at Clotilde's and brought it home as a surprise. Isn't she an old darling?"

Mrs. Travers, in a chair before the fire, warming her feet, gave the girl a sunny glance, and extended her left hand to her niece.

"I can't get up. I'm too tired. How are you, my dear child?"

"Flourishing!" Indeed she looked it. A faint colour was in her cheeks; about her was an atmosphere of happiness rather unusual. In her white furs she suggested winter—a winter of glimmering hoar-frost and the tingle of life that stirs the young with the approach of the snowy weather. "I've been skating at Prince's. I just ran in for a peep at you both on my way home." She sat down on the edge of the bed. "Sandy was there. He gave me tea. He was teaching the little Egerton girl to skate. They made such a quaint couple, but she couldn't have a better master. He's really wonderful on the ice."

"I know. I wanted to go with him, but I'm so busy just now."

Sheila looked rather important, and Cara smiled in her sleeve.

Mrs. Travers was indulging in a perfect orgy of premature plans. Sheila's trousseau would be ready long before it was required. Of late the mother and the daughter had grown closer in sympathy, knit by the common tie of marriage. It strengthened the young girl's position, and the parting ahead made both of them anxious to avoid disputes. The mother refrained from lecturing, and Sheila was conscious of this and grateful. In return she gave way to her parent in many unimportant trifles, surprised herself by the result: a recrudescence of early love.

Mr. Travers looked on and approved. His two dear ones were coming together. At times he felt a little lonely, aware that a man stood outside the pale of these feminine mysteries. He dreaded the thought of that empty room from whence no bright young face would peep to greet him on his way to his bath, a habit sanctified by the years; yet consoled himself with the secret thought—his love for his wife was very possessive—that her mother would then belong to him entirely and need his comfort.

He watched too, with secret amusement, the change in his little daughter. She was less boyish and abrupt; dress had become an important matter. But he wondered at times if she understood the seriousness of the step before her. He had broached the subject to his wife. But Mrs. Travers had waved it aside nervously with her usual shrinking from all that disturbed her serene outlook.

"My dear mother never told me *anything*. I'm sure she was wise. Innocence is the best shield against the dangers of the world. I can trust Sandy." She smiled sweetly. "I trusted you, didn't I, John?"

"Yes, my dear." He felt helpless. All the robuster side of his nature disapproved of this secrecy. Yet he liked his prospective son-in-law, and decided to have a quiet talk with

the man himself on the eve of marriage. He had never minced matters with Rex, and the boy had justified his methods.

Meanwhile, generously, he enabled the pair to launch out into a wild extravagance, enjoying a little private amusement when he saw his wife, true to type, cut down some minor item with the pride of a careful manager and the next moment succumb to her weakness for a luxurious effect.

"Bless her! She's enjoying herself." That was how he summed it up, spending long hours at his work as a salve to his business conscience.

Cara was prattling on.

"Who do you think I ran across at the theatre last night? An old admirer of yours—guess?"

She laughed at Sheila, who responded in the same spirit:

"I haven't any."

"You faithless young person! It was Lance. I don't think he approves of your marriage."

Mrs. Travers smiled at this.

"I'm sure Lance wouldn't mind. Such a boy! He was like a brother."

Sheila fidgeted.

"Is he in town?"

"Yes, for a week. He wants to see you." Cara loosened the white fox round her shoulders. The room felt hot after the keen air outside. For January had blown in, cold, on the heels of a mild Christmas. "I asked him to lunch next Sunday. Will you come, Sheila, and bring Sandy? Charles is away for the week-end, shooting, so we shall be a *partie carrée*."

"I'm afraid we can't, thanks awfully. We've promised to go to some friends of Sandy's." She did not want to meet Lance. What was the good of raking things up? She felt a little ashamed too. Had she been cruel to the boy? And now she was to marry a "man." Her old speech recurred to her. What was it Lance had retorted? Something about being "taught a lesson." She looked for a moment rather disdainful.

"Poor Lance!" Cara laughed. "Well, I must fly. I've people to dinner and the theatre and a late dance. What a life!" She stood up.

"You know you enjoy it," said Mrs. Travers indulgently. She was fond of her niece.

"Sometimes." A shadow fell across the delicate pointed face. "There are days when I feel I should like to escape into some quiet country place. Dig for potatoes and vegetate!" She wound up with a light laugh.

"All alone?" Sheila mocked her.

"Ah, that's the pinch." Her mouth drooped into the old sad expression.

"But she'd have Charles," said Mrs. Travers, placid, in front of the cheerful fire. She looked up, faintly surprised at the pause which followed this happy suggestion.

Cara, with a quick movement, turned to her cousin.

"And you and Sandy could come down and feed the pigs. You'd probably be bored to tears, and quarrel. That's the only spice permitted to the simple life. Then you could motor back to town, have a good dinner, and make it up, pitying your country cousins, who imagine that love thrives best in a cottage. No! London's my right setting. With light and laughter and people around me.

'Better by far be tempest-tossed
Than rot in harbour mud.'

It's true."

She spoke rather feverishly, as if she were convincing herself against her innermost desires, and moved forward to the mirror.

"That's right—wrap up warm. It's a north-east wind," said her aunt.

Cara was fastening the little clip of the head of the fox to its tail.

"The whiting's example," she explained. "And now I go in search of sauce! No, thanks, I don't want a hansom. Tim's waiting for me outside. We had such a luxurious one it seemed a pity to give it up."

My dear, why didn't he come in?" Mrs. Travers looked shocked.

"Oh, he's accustomed to wait," laughed Cara. "He's enjoying a smoke. It's quite all right." She was off with a gay wave of her hand. "We'll meet to-morrow at Theo's dance—a bad floor but a good supper, so there's sure to be a crowd of ı en!"

The door closed. Mrs. Travers sighed.

"A dear girl, but such a whirlwind. I suppose it's the modern type. I'm glad you're not like her, Sheila. You enjoy your pleasures thoroughly, but they're not your only aim in life. Which reminds me, Clotilde thinks——"

There came a tap at the door, and the maid entered to announce that Sandy was in the drawing-room and wanted to see "Miss Sheila."

"Bother! I'm not dressed."

"My dear, you can go down in that. Just fasten the ribbons round your waist. There now, it looks like a tea-gown. But you mustn't let him keep you long. He has to get back and dress for dinner, and you know Sandy's never punctual."

Sheila gave a glance at the mirror. Reassured by her appearance, for the dainty wrapper suited her and gave her height—a touchy point—she patted a loose lock into place and was off with the light in her eyes that Sandy alone could evoke. As she passed her mother she bent and kissed her.

"Take a rest! You look tired out."

"Ah, you want him to yourself." Mrs. Travers smiled, playful. She enjoyed the sentimental side of her daughter's engagement, which recalled memories of her own youth. Sandy's manner to her was perfect, full of a gentle flattery under its genuine respect. He liked her and understood her. She was so entirely feminine. Mrs. Travers accepted his homage as her due from a man of his age to a woman of her "experience." She heard the drawing-room door open and shut. Then she closed her eyes. There was time for a little nap. Of late she had been feeling her age. Yet age was a very beautiful thing—and dignified—if one lived nobly.

Her head nodded, then came to rest against the cushion, and she dozed.

Meanwhile, Sandy in the fine richly-furnished double drawing-room was holding Sheila at arm's length, an admiring twinkle in his eyes.

"How nice you look. What a stunning nighty!"

"It isn't! It's a dressing-gown. Mother said- —" She was slightly confused.

"I know." He laughed. "Look here, old dear, I'm bothered to death. I can't come to-night. A cousin of mine has turned up from his ship. He has only this evening in town and he wants me to trot him round. He ran me to earth at the club the moment I reached it from Prince's. I suggested ringing up your mother and asking if I might bring him here, but he'd got his plans all cut and dried—a theatre and so forth—so it hardly seemed worth while. Do you mind?"

"Of course not." She tried to hide her momentary disappointment. "You mustn't neglect your friends for me. I should hate that, now or later."

"I know. You're such a little sport. Not many women think like that! It's one of the rocks on which married couples so often founder—a man's old pals." He looked at her gratefully. "I don't want to. I'd rather come here, but Fraser's such a dear chap. He's a brother of Desmond Broome's, you know. He's off to Yorkshire early to-morrow to spend the rest of his leave with them. I wish you weren't going away. This was one of our last evenings."

"Never mind. It's not for long. Only a fortnight."

"*Only?*" He frowned. "You cold-blooded little creature! Why should I be turned down for a pair of antediluvian aunts?"

"Who are *my* 'old pals,'" she reminded him.

"Yes, you have me there." He chuckled, then sighed.

For Sheila was off to Northumberland the following week, for a couple of visits to two of her father's sisters who lived not far from her old home. It was a promise of long stand-

ing. Later she was to join Sandy at his cousin's place near York, for a week's hunting. They both of them were looking forward to the adventure.

"Well, we'll have a good time at Cropley Manor." He pressed his hand to his brow with a gesture of annoyance.

"Headache?" she asked.

He nodded, frowning.

"I always seem to be getting them now."

"You poor dear! Have some aspirin?" She studied his face anxiously.

"No, thanks. I hate drugs. It's nothing." He smiled. "I'm not delicate. You needn't look so upset. I'll go 'on the bust' with Fraser to-night. Shall I?" He did not wait for her answer, but caught her close to him and hugged her. "I believe you'd have answered, reluctantly, 'Yes'! But I shan't. I'm being such a good boy—quite a reformed character. That's your doing—you blessed infant!"

The clock rang out warningly.

"I must go—dash it! Kiss me again. No—properly." He released her at last. "That's better than aspirin! See you to-morrow. I'm coming to lunch. Remind your mother that she asked me!"

"Rather a broad hint," laughed Sheila. She watched him go with regretful eyes. He didn't look up to his usual form, and she wondered what was wrong with him.

Upstairs she found her mother sleeping peacefully by the fire. Her face looked thin in repose with faint hollows at the temples. Sheila felt the menace of Time. Mrs. Travers was getting old. How hard it was to watch the years press heavily on those one loved and to stand by, powerless, in all the throbbing strength of youth. She was brought up sharply by the thought that love and life were transitory. A few more decades and she and Sandy would begin the slow, unavailing descent.

"But there must be something finer after? We can't live for no purpose?" She clutched at her threatened courage. Her religion was a simple one and as yet no trouble had

deepened the need of help outside human support; her beliefs had never been put to the test.

She heard an approaching heavy step. It was her father's. She turned quickly to warn him, but it was too late. He surged through the open door, panting a little from the climb up the steep London stairs.

"You there, my dear?" He called to his wife. "Oh, I'm sorry." He stopped, abashed.

Mrs. Travers, with a start, sat up, her eyelids blinking.

"Yes?" She looked rather dazed. Then she began to cough.

"I woke you up—how thoughtless!" He stole forward, absurdly, on tiptoe.

"Was I asleep?" She smiled at him, but caught her breath. "I felt so tired. I think I've got a little chill." She raised her cheek for his kiss. "This cold weather doesn't suit me."

"You ought to be safe out of England." He frowned. "It's your first winter here for years. I shouldn't have allowed it."

Sheila felt guilty. She knew that her marriage was the reason for this departure from the long-established custom.

"Couldn't you take Mother to Bournemouth?"

"I might. Would you like it, dear?"

"No—I prefer my own home." She was her placid self again. "Now, don't you go worrying, John. I'm quite all right. It's only a cold." She turned to her daughter. "Has Sandy gone?"

"Yes." Sheila explained what had happened.

"Then he's not dining here to-night." Mrs. Travers began to plan an alteration in the menu. "I think we can do quite well with the sweet—there's no need for a savoury. Just touch that bell. I'll tell Martha. You see, dear child, there are many ways in which one can save small expenses. When you have a house of your own, remember this. You will have to be careful or you won't find your money last." Catching her husband's twinkling eyes, she corrected him.

"I'm quite right, John. The child must learn economy." She gave the necessary order to the maid, and added with a shiver, "Close that door. It's cold to-night."

Mr. Travers looked anxious.

"A good bottle of champagne would pick you up. I'll see about it."

Mrs. Travers' face brightened. It was a pet weakness of hers.

"Just as you like, dear," she said sweetly.

Her husband steadied his expression until he found himself on the landing. Then he gave a little chuckle.

"Isn't that a woman all over? To cut down six sardines and have a bottle of Veuve Clicquot." He enjoyed the joke for a moment, then his loyalty rose in arms. "Bless her! She deserves all and more than I can give her now. She's been a wife in a thousand. If only Sheila is half as good, Sandy has much to be thankful for—the young rascal!" But he smiled. The man's charm had not been wasted on his future father-in-law. "He's steadying down too, I think. I was rather anxious at the start. After all, if a man's a man he must sow his wild oats some time."

He did not share in his wife's beliefs. His moral outlook was sturdier. He accepted the fact of human weakness, but saw beyond it a hope of redemption when folly had brought its punishment. He had proved in his own person the saving grace of love and labour. They were the mainsprings of his life.

Sheila, meanwhile, was urging her mother not to dress for dinner that night.

"You look so nice as you are, and the passages are very draughty."

But Mrs. Travers refused to be tempted. It was an infringement of the rules she set for herself. She had "always dressed." Even in the early days of her marriage she had clung to the habit inculcated in her girlhood. Though her wardrobe might be scanty, she was fresh and smiling "when John came home." With the hard-working, weary

man it provided a pleasant contrast to his business day, and revived his love for the beautiful woman who faced poverty, head high. She was raising him up to her own standard: that class which permits much outward indulgence, yet has only been formed by an adherence to a code that necessitates self-control in many little private matters.

"Never allow yourself to get slovenly when you are married." Mrs. Travers was leading the way to her room and paused for a word of advice. "It's a grave mistake. I've seen the result. It lowers a woman's dignity. She loses her hold upon her husband. Even illness does not excuse it. One can always keep oneself tidy and clean." She moved on, consciously proud. She had lived up to her beliefs.

Sheila watched her slow progress, a little frown between her brows.

"All right, mother. Mind that mat!" She sprang forward, a hand outstretched. "You nearly slipped down." Her voice was anxious.

"It's my rheumatism," said Mrs. Travers. "I'm getting an old woman, Sheila."

"You're not!" The girl gave her a hug. "But you oughtn't to be in London now. It's *my* fault."

Mrs. Travers turned.

"Nonsense, child. I'm enjoying myself. I'm going to have your trousseau perfect. It's the last thing I shall do for you." Despite her courage, her face was wistful.

A lump rose in Sheila's throat.

"I don't want to leave you!" She spoke hotly.

"Not for Sandy?"

Her mother smiled. But she was pleased, and Sheila saw it. She did not guess that the little scene would become a precious memory to store against the barren years, but her eyes took in unconsciously the graceful figure silhouetted against the warm and dainty room.

"I wouldn't do it for anyone else."

"Well, that's as it should be," said Mrs. Travers. "I believe that a really good woman only loves once in her life."

She added ingenuously, "I've proved it myself with your dear father."

It seemed an unanswerable argument. Sheila's thoughts turned to Sandy.

"But men are different," she suggested.

Mrs. Travers look undecided.

"They have their failings, but I think it is often the fault of thoughtless women who encourage them when they shouldn't, just for the sake of admiration. It's a great pity." She sighed gently and changed the subject, aware that they stood on the edge of a perilous discussion. "Now run away and dress, my dear. Your hair is shockingly untidy."

Sheila laughed as she closed the door. She felt no longer the old rebellion at being treated like a child. She had come into her woman's kingdom—or so she believed—and it took away the sting of withheld independence.

Soon she would be Sandy's wife. Her thoughts moved on to the borderland of another possibility. She had the most vague idea of the facts surrounding maternity, but a baby would be "jolly nice." That was how she viewed the matter. And Sandy liked children too. They had discussed it openly, the man slightly amused at the way she took the whole question for granted. But he guarded his speech since the day they had discussed Mrs. Lester. Although they indulged in lovers' tiffs—for Sandy had a quick temper, though he generally managed to control it—they never arose from the same cause as on that memorable afternoon. She knew no more of the life he had led before he had met her. He saw to that, avoiding any introductions which might lead him into difficulties.

He had been a little afraid of Cara, with her wide knowledge of the world, but had waited his opportunity and had helped her one day unobtrusively to a quiet meeting with Captain Craik. Since then they had been allies, linked by a common secret. Of this Sheila was ignorant. She was pleased that her cousin, supremely smart, and in touch with all the best people, should approve of the man she had chosen.

Secretly she admired Cara, her witty talk and the way she contrived to hide her unhappy married state. But of late her cousin had recovered a gaiety which was most infectious. She had a large crowd of admirers whom she kept at a laughing distance, aware of the psychological reason. For a much-loved woman surrounds herself with an atmosphere of attraction subtly felt by the opposite sex—like a rose when it reaches its perfection and exhales a more exquisite perfume.

Even Sheila, unconsciously, had recognized this curious fact, though in a much lesser degree.

"Every one wants to dance with me now," she told Sandy with mischievous pleasure. "I suppose it's because they feel safe!"

Sandy had been a trifle jealous.

"More likely my influence on your manners. You're not such a tom-boy as you were."

They had argued it out, losing their tempers just enough to make it worth while to indulge in a scene of forgiveness.

Quarrels would always end this way. So Sheila thought as she pulled off her stockings and hunted round for a silk pair. For she knew "how to manage Sandy."

A false deduction. From first to last Sandy had skilfully "managed" her.

. . . . . .

Sheila placed the last fittings in her dressing-case hurriedly, and locked her trunk as the note of the gong boomed and died away in the hall.

In an hour's time Sandy would come and take her to the terminus from which she would travel to the North. She would miss him, she decided. Still, it was only for a fortnight, and she would see the countryside, endeared to her by her childhood. She wondered if old Mrs. Twine still combined the village stores with the dignity of the post office, and if Farmer Cripps, down the lane, had any terrier puppies for sale? Sandy had promised her a dog.

She drove the pins into her hat, and, with a hasty glance around her, ran downstairs to her breakfast.

"*Salut!*" She greeted her parents gaily, then paused,

amazed. Her mother was crying. Her father leaned over her, one hand on her shoulder, sympathetic.

"Oh, Sheila!" Mrs. Travers looked up. "Such a dreadful thing—I can't believe it! I never would have thought it of Cara. My sister's child——" She gave a sob. Then she remembered her daughter's years. "Do you think she ought to know, John?" Her pretty blue eyes, full of tears, sought assurance from her husband.

"Of course, my dear. She's bound to hear it." He realized that his wife shrank from the explanation, and added, "I'll tell her."

"Is she ill?" Sheila interrupted. "Dead" was the word in her mind.

"Worse than that," moaned Mrs. Travers.

Sheila, bewildered, turned to her father. He gave her a warning frown.

"Your mother's upset, and I don't wonder. Cara has run away from her husband, with Captain Craik. It's a bad business."

"No!" The girl looked incredulous. "With Tim? But why? Where have they gone?"

"To Paris. She's written a letter to Mother. She hopes that Charles will divorce her."

Mrs. Travers wiped her eyes and gazed furtively at Sheila.

"If people question you, my child, you must know nothing. It's far wiser. It's been a dreadful shock to me. When I think of her as a tiny baby—and now *this*——" Her lips quivered. "I was fond of Cara. I thought her, at times, pleasure-loving and rather worldly, but I never imagined that she could lose all self-respect and sense of honour. Nor Captain Craik. And they stayed at my house—*together*! It's too disgraceful." Indignation steadied her, and she went on very severely, "There's no excuse. It's a wicked thing. You must never speak to Cara again," adding, slightly consoled by the thought, "though you're not likely to meet her now."

"But what will she do?" Sheila persisted.

"I don't know. It doesn't concern me." Mrs. Travers refused to face any further consequences. She wiped her

hands of the guilty pair mentally and with a gesture, delicate and fine as herself, of her lawn handkerchief.

Sheila frowned. She was stunned by the news, yet her love for her cousin still survived and clamoured for further enlightenment.

"She hasn't any money, you know." The remark was addressed to her father.

"Craik has a small income. I only hope he'll stand by her."

The girl's face unconsciously brightened.

"And marry her?"

"It's the least he can do." Mr. Travers shrugged his shoulders. Then he glanced across at the clock. "What about your train, child? You must have some breakfast." He stooped to his wife. "Now, my dearest, you mustn't fret. There's Sheila waiting for her coffee, and we can't do any good by talking. Sandy will be here in a minute."

This had the desired effect. Mrs. Travers bestirred herself and the meal passed in a mood of forced and resigned cheerfulness.

There came the familiar rat-tat at the front door. Sheila sprang up.

"You can tell Sandy in the cab," Mr. Travers said hurriedly. "We don't want to discuss it again."

Sandy was announced. He looked fresh and full of life.

"Good morning! How's all the world?"

"Mother's caught a bad cold," Sheila explained as she saw him glance at that lady's tear-stained countenance.

"I'm so sorry." He pressed her hand gravely, guessing that something was wrong and accepting the excuse at once. For Sandy's tact never failed him. "You must nurse up. It's bitter to-day. A north wind and freezing hard."

Mrs. Travers felt grateful to Sheila for safeguarding her dignity. She so rarely indulged in a "scene."

"It's only a chill—it will pass off. You must see that the child has a nice carriage and a couple of hot-water tins."

"I will. Shall I put her in charge of the guard?" He

darted a mischievous look sideways, expecting an indignant retort. But Sheila passed it over in silence. "What's up?" he thought to himself.

The usual fuss of departure followed, but at last they were trundling along in the cab under a goodly burden of luggage.

"Well, old lady?" He drew her close. "You're very silent. Is anything wrong?"

"I'm dreadfully worried." She told him the reason.

"Phew!" Sandy gave a whistle.

She watched his expression anxiously. Her family meant so much to her, and she felt the shadow of disgrace threatening one of those she loved.

Sandy looked unnaturally solemn. Then his lips began to twitch. He seemed to be suffering from some emotion.

"Sandy?"

Her nervous voice supplied the finishing touch to his inward struggle. He exploded into sudden mirth, his laughter the louder for being checked.

Sheila gave an indignant gasp.

"My dear, I'm sorry. I couldn't help it! You talk as if Lucifer had been thrown out of heaven a second time. Poor old Tim! It was bound to happen. Every one knew that it was coming."

The girl drew back, flushed and startled.

"How *could* they? It's horrible."

"Not at all. It's human nature." His face hardened, obstinate. "There was a woman, pretty and young, with a perfect brute of a husband—oh, every one knows what Charles is like. His temper's a byword at the Club. And old Tim comes along, head over heels in love with her." He saw that Sheila was deeply resenting his attitude. He changed his tactics. "How would you like to be tied to Charles for the rest of your life? Just picture it. Now, don't be vexed with me, old dear. Imagine yourself in her shoes. Haven't you seen the way he treats her? Then suppose that you met me, and that I gave you a chance of escape. Wouldn't you feel inclined to take it?"

"No!" The word rang with defiance.

"Well——" He smiled. "You've got your people. Cara's alone in the world, with no children to complicate matters. I should think her private life's appalling! Charles is a cold-blooded sensualist. I'll admit he's brilliant at his profession, but a stinging tongue and a bitter wit are not soothing in home life. Now try and put the conventional notions on marriage aside for a moment." He slipped a hand through her arm. It stiffened. "I'm appealing to your sense of justice." He saw he had struck the right note.

"Well—I'll listen." A grudging concession.

"That's right. We'll have fair play. There are two sides to every question. There's this one, for instance. Do you think it's more moral for a woman to live with a man whom she hates, for the sake of material comfort and the good opinion of the world, than to cut adrift at the sacrifice of both these and start afresh?"

Sheila looked rather puzzled.

"She needn't have gone off with Tim. She could have had a separation."

Sandy scorned this compromise.

"Separations are all rot! They do a lot more harm than good." He explained his reasons carefully. "And how, if you please, was Cara to live if she went off by herself? She's no money of her own. At least, that's what I understood."

Sheila nodded. Sandy went on.

"After all, it wasn't so easy. Cara's giving up a lot. Craik has only a moderate income, and she's a luxurious little lady. She'll be cut by a host of decent people, both now and after marriage. I'm not afraid that Craik will fail her. He's a good chap—every one likes him. Of course Charles will divorce her. He's watched it going on for months."

"You mean that he's *guessed*?" Sheila turned to stare at Sandy, disgust in her eyes. "Oh, he couldn't!"

Sandy nodded.

"As a matter of fact, between ourselves, there's another

woman in the case. I found it out by accident. Will that convince you?" He saw her wince. "Charles will probably marry her—on the strength of his stainless reputation! In nine-tenths of these cases there's collusion. You can't avoid it. Not with our laws in their present state. If there's one thing that ought to be altered in our antediluvian system, it's the whole question of divorce."

"But if Charles has behaved badly, why didn't Cara divorce *him*?" She spoke out courageously, although she felt vague on the subject.

"She couldn't, my dear. She'd have to prove cruelty as well, you know. Charles is a lot too canny for that! I'm for new divorce laws. I'll go further and say that I think Cara is a plucky woman. I respect her a thousand times more than if she'd remained with her husband and carried on with Tim *sub rosa*. But you can't get the 'unco guid' to see it. Of course your mother is old-fashioned, and, besides that, she's happily married. Your father's a perfect saint to her. You mustn't think that the whole world lives as your people do. It will narrow your sympathies."

The girl's eyes were full of trouble.

"All the same it isn't right."

"It's the lesser of two evils."

The cab jolted on slowly. Sheila stared out of the window. Sandy's eloquence had moved her, and she was very fond of her cousin. In a way she was glad that the man she loved had put in a sporting plea for Cara.

His hand tightened on her arm. She turned her head with a faint smile.

"Mother says, if we meet, that I'm not to speak to her."

He nodded his head.

"That's hard. You don't like turning your back on a pal?"

"It seems as if one thought oneself——" She hunted for the right expression.

"Too good to live," suggested Sandy.

"Something like it. And awfully *mean*."

"You are a sportsman!" He looked at her fondly. They

were together again in spirit. "I'll suggest a way out of it. Obey your people while you're with them. But when we're married, you can take it from me that there'll always be a welcome for Cara. You needn't go about with her publicly—that's different. You can't force her down people's throats. It would do her more harm than good. But, if you're the girl I've always found you, you won't join in the virtuous gang who thrust her forth beyond the pale for living up to her convictions. One can't judge people in the lump, or divide them into saints and sinners—luckily!" His eyes twinkled. "Of course there are lots of silly women who run away in a fit of hysteria after a quarrel with their husbands. But Cara's not that futile sort. This has not been done in a hurry. She's had plenty of time to decide if love in a cottage is really worth it."

Sheila started.

"How odd! She was talking of that the other day—*joking* about it! Did you guess?"

Sandy laughed heartily.

"You little goose! I expect David prattled about a hut in a vineyard with Bathsheba. He behaved far worse than old Tim, for he killed off the unwanted husband. Yet we sing his psalms every Sabbath—how do you account for that? The rummiest thing, to my mind, is that the wisest chap on earth was the result of that union. I suppose it was real love." He glanced thoughtfully through the glass. "Oh, damn!—here's the station. And we've wasted all our time on Cara."

"Never mind." She hesitated. "I'm rather glad that you think I needn't cut her—afterwards."

Sandy was pleased. He had gained his point.

"You can now! She's spoilt our drive. I had wild thoughts of missing this train. Unluckily there are others. Hop out! I'll see to the luggage. Why, we've got loads of time." He followed her on to the greasy pavement, slipped, she caught his arm, and they laughed. It seemed to clear the air of trouble.

Then ensued a little battle as to who should pay the cab

man. Sandy prevailed. As they followed the barrow heaped up with her belongings, he thought she still seemed a shade depressed.

"Look here, Mate, you shall stand me a drink! We'll go to the bar and disgrace ourselves."

Sheila's eyes began to dance.

"What fun! Could we, Sandy?"

"Rather!"

Arm in arm they invaded the busy refreshment-room, and found a large and dignified barmaid who condescended to pour out two glassfuls of cherry-brandy.

"That ought to warm you up, my child."

"If it doesn't go to my head," laughed Sheila.

"You'll have loads of time to sleep it off. It will serve you right if you're run in. For deserting me—alone in London! I say"—he lowered his musical voice—"we're shocking the Red Queen." For the florid barmaid was watching them with a supercilious disdain. "Now—to our next merry meeting! Oh no, we'll do it properly." He clinked his glass against her own.

"To *you*." Her heart was in her eyes. Her face, rosy from the air of the keen morning, was full of hope. A little curl of dark hair had escaped from under her velvet toque and waved against her soft throat. In the heavy folds of her travelling coat she had lost her look of immaturity. Here was the woman whom he loved, no longer the schoolgirl—his wife to be. He had never felt so assured of his fate as at that moment when they stood in their unromantic setting, with busy travellers bustling in and out amidst a clatter of glasses and the stale smell of smoke and liquor.

"You love me?" His voice was a whisper.

She nodded. There was no need for words.

"And you will—*always*?"

"Always," she vowed.

So they drank to the unknown future.

CHAPTER VII

SHE missed Sandy. But not so much as she had at first anticipated.

To begin with, there were his letters, and the man was no mean scribe. He told her little of his doings, but through the vivid sentences ran an undercurrent of genuine passion. He showed her how much he wanted her; not always a wise course with a woman. She felt serenely sure of him; in six weeks they would be married.

She missed his voice and his handsome presence—less acutely, the touch of his hand—and was happy, though conscious of loneliness at odd moments during the day. Still, there were minor compensations. She found herself for the first time a person of some importance.

Under her mother's gentle rule she had hardly realized the fact of what an excellent match it was. The married aunt, with whom she stayed for the first week, enlightened her. She was driven about the quiet country to call on people who seemed to be a little strange and overwhelming. Mrs. Meakens invariably introduced her as "my niece, who is going to marry Sir Filgate Hinkson." She sometimes added, "the baronet."

There were girls, quite unusually friendly, who wanted to see her engagement ring and to hear details of her trousseau—such intimate details! If the lace on all her under-garments were "real"? This seemed to worry them a good deal, Sheila thought. And was Sandy a "handsome man"? They "supposed" he would give her a tiara and that she would be "presented at Court"? When she remarked casually that she'd been through it once—it was rather a bore that it didn't

count after marriage, they laughed and declared that she was "too funny"! Anyhow, they were very kind.

She liked her uncle, a snuff-coloured man of uncertain age, with a humble manner. He christened her "little Sunbeam," and, in a moment of expansion, confided that he'd had his troubles, but a firm faith in Providence and Guinness's stout helped a man. He recommended both to her—provided she wasn't liverish.

They gave her what they called an "eppurn." It was reminiscent of a statue of Laocoon, with writhing serpents of silver-gilt that twined closely round vases of engraved glass, which vainly tried to elude the embrace, and subsided lower into dishes on which could be placed—so her aunt explained—preserved ginger and French prunes. It would make a "handsome centre-piece." Sheila nerved herself to be grateful. Conscious of disloyalty, she refused to imagine Sandy's whistle when he first should see this treasure.

But she wished that her aunt would not insist on a constant allusion to his title. It seemed so unnecessary. Why couldn't she call him "Sandy"? Also she disliked the way Mrs. Meakens referred to her mother, usually with a little sniff and a "*Poor* John! He works so hard." "I suppose your mother is still as gay as ever?" This was a standard phrase. Or "Still as well-dressed?" Sheila rebelled on the fifth day of her visit.

"You never say 'still as good,'" she remarked to her aunt with a laugh.

Mrs. Meakens tossed her head.

"We never had much in common. Poor John married above him, and, being what he is, he felt it his duty to work hard in order to provide your mother with luxuries."

"But mother worked too," said Sheila. "I think they were *both* very plucky."

Silence.

Sheila resented it.

"What I can't understand," she said at last, "is why you like me to marry Sandy. It's the same thing, isn't it?"

Mrs. Meakens feverishly busied herself with an Indian cloth draped on the back of the upright piano.

"Sir Filgate has ample means."

So that was the rub: a dowerless bride!

Her aunt had kept house for Sheila's father in the early days, and the advent of the beautiful and well-bred wife had been a bitter blow to her.

Sheila, as a tiny child, had never realized the feud between Mrs. Travers and "John's people." Even now, on this first visit for many long eventful years, her mother had left her ignorant of the secret undercurrent. It was partly through loyalty to her husband and partly through her normal desire to avoid any unpleasant subject. She had escaped thankfully from their subtle interference to the wider field of London life. She bore them no active malice, but looked on their attitude as the result of a lack of good-breeding coupled with a narrow-minded jealousy. For John had been the only brother. Nevertheless, she was amused by Sheila's letters and descriptions, divining much that was left unsaid. She pictured the girl in the ornate house on the outskirts of the town. "Just far enough out," Mrs. Meakens would say, "to be *real* country, and yet we get the evening papers. We don't feel buried." And the Sunday when her sister-in-law was "at home" in the afternoon to people who walked in from the town and absorbed a prodigious tea. For the elderly matrons there would be a "glass of port wine, my dear," and Mr. Meakens would wear a frock-coat with one button fastened at the waist and exhale an odour of brilliantine. Mrs. Travers could picture it all. It seemed like a half-forgotten nightmare.

To Sheila it held novelty, yet she felt in her heart, at times, a curious sense of discomfort. She was sorry for her uncle, a pawn in her aunt's managing hands, harassed by petty household rules and snubbed for his social blunders. Altogether she was relieved when the last day of her visit dawned and she drove through the provincial streets, her luggage piled on the box. After an endless farewell to her aunt—who had bearded a formidable lady on the platform and introduced Sheila to

"our Mayoress, my dear," with the usual allusion to the girl's forthcoming marriage—she was glad to find herself alone, *en route* for the second adventure.

This time she had been forewarned. Miss Travers, the elder sister, lived in a little country cottage settled on her by her brother and once a part of his property. Mrs. Meakens had emphasized the fact that Susan was not well off. Added to this, she had no head! "Poor Susan——" Another "poor." Sheila decided that she would like her.

She tried to revive a memory of the little spinster lady. All she could retrieve from the past was the fact that her cheeks had been very soft, and that consolation had streamed from her on a day when Sheila had been in disgrace over some misdemeanour of childhood.

But the real excitement of the visit was the idea that she would see, once again, her old home and the village she visited in dreams. Even Sandy was forgotten, and her eyes were strained for the first glimpse of the familiar landmarks as she rubbed the steamy window-panes with the strap for a clearer view.

No one was at the station to meet her. Or so she thought as she got out. Then, as the train jerked on again, there rose from the opposite platform a cry, warm but incoherent.

"Oh dear, *there* you are! I'm the wrong side—I always forget which is the 'up' and the 'down.' Don't *attempt* to cross the line!" An excited, roundabout little figure was waving an uncoiled umbrella. Only when the gates had closed at the cross-roads did she venture over. "So stupid of me! Forgive me, darling." She hugged the girl, her mushroom hat cocked blindly over one eye. "A good journey? How well you look! Isn't it cold? I'm so proud—— Oh, there's the porter! You won't mind walking? Dear me, you're like your father—your mother too!" She kissed her again.

Yes, her cheeks were as soft as ever.

"I'd rather walk," Sheila agreed. "I want to see everything. It's so lovely to be in the old place."

"Of course! Dear child! And you've grown so tall. Down, Spot!" Aunt Susan rebuked a long-tailed mongrel

which leaped on her with plebeian want of tact. "No, not my dog—at least, it's lame. So I took it in—it was starving. Be quiet, Spot!" Her moon-like face, with its buttonhole of a mouth and kind eyes, grew comical in an effort at severity. "Dear me, he's very tiresome—so bad for one's best skirt."

Sheila cuffed him.

"Oh, my love, you mustn't do that. The poor thing's *lame*. He doesn't mean it. *Down*, Spot!"

"He ought to learn his manners," laughed Sheila.

They passed into the country road, the hedges burdened with the snow above the frozen line of the brook, the air keen and exhilarating.

"Why, there's the church. How near it is!" The girl blinked in the frosty sunshine. Everything seemed to have dwindled. The long, long lane to the station; the rectory, once so large, now a low huddled house, dwarfed by the bare elms behind it; prim rows of cottages, ugly with their slate roofs, and the muddy little village pond where boys were cracking the ice with stones; all were the same and yet bereft of their ancient magnitude.

"Can't we go round by Crosskeys?" Sheila asked impulsively. Here surely the glamour lingered; the old home must defy Time.

"It's rather far." Aunt Susan paused and absently folded her umbrella. The elastic lacked a button and resisted her instinct of tidiness. "There's tea—and I said we'd be punctual. Hannah's making hot cakes. Still, darling——"

Sheila gave in.

"I'll go later. Tea sounds so nice."

Her aunt heaved a sigh of relief.

"Well, my love, it would be better."

Sheila glanced, as they passed, at the villagers, dawdling on the doorsteps. She received in return no friendly greeting, but a stony curiosity: the repellent attitude of the North that chills the heart of the Southerner. All the old faces had vanished. Over the door of the post office was a new name. She felt depressed.

Aunt Susan was prattling on :

" It hasn't changed much since your time. Of course we've got a new rector, and dear old Dr. Higgs is dead. I can't say I like the man in his shoes—full of new-fangled notions. And charges double, which doesn't seem fair, as he gives so few medicines ; talks a lot about fresh air, which, of course, is very bad for the chest. He was quite rude to me one day when he found me pasting up the windows. I've still my asthma, but, as I say, it might be worse at my age. How is your dear father ? "

Sheila tried an experiment.

" Very well—*working hard.*"

" And your mother ? Is she as pretty as ever ? "

This seemed to the girl a slight improvement.

" She's feeling the cold weather this winter. We've been rather anxious about her."

" Dear me." Miss Travers sighed. " She's getting on, like all of us." There was faint satisfaction in the speech, yet her voice was not unkindly. " She sent me a beautiful shawl at Christmas. I'm afraid it must have been very expensive."

This was difficult to fathom. Extravagance or gratitude ?

They turned up a narrow lane and came at last to The Firs, a little stone house set back with a narrow garden in the front in which was planted a mountain ash. Sheila wondered at the name. But, of course, she couldn't call it " The Ashes " !

There were no other signs of trees in the cold serenity of the scene.

A stout woman opened the door and seemed at once to take possession of her mistress and the guest.

" Ye're late. Where's the luggage ? " she asked.

" I told the porter." Aunt Susan was vague. " He's sure to see to it directly."

" There's no directly wi' Tam M^cGregor. I'd best go round after tea—and it's tea at once or the cakes will spoil. Now, miss, will ye take off your hat ? "

Sheila was immensely amused.

"Yes. Can I hang it here?" She pulled out the pins and ran her fingers through her thick, tossed locks.

"Ye've bonny hair, like your father." The faithful servant's hard face relaxed into a prim approval.

"She's very like him—except the eyes." Aunt Susan beamed at Hannah and led the way to the dining-room.

The table was spread with good things, home-made scones and cakes and honey, and bright with a bunch of chrysanthemums. A clear fire of Northern coal crackled its welcome from the hearth.

"How nice!" The girl looked round her. "I haven't seen a fire like that since I left home." She warmed her hands. By this simple speech she completed her conquest of the little spinster lady.

"Jane's careful with the coals." Jane was the younger sister. Not for years had she snubbed Miss Travers without rousing a certain rancour. "It's all *outsides* at her place. Now I'm one for simple comforts."

Hannah came in with the griddle cakes.

"Ye'll eat these first—while they're hot."

"Rather!" The girl smiled. "I remember them in the old days."

"But ye don't remember me," said Hannah. "Ye wouldn't. It's natural. I was kitchenmaid when you was born, and afterwards I went to Miss Susan."

"You've lived at Crosskeys?" Sheila's face was full of excited satisfaction. "I'm sorry I didn't recognize you."

"You was turning two when I left." Hannah chuckled, grimly amused. Then she cast a severe look at Miss Travers, who with one glove off and one still buttoned was vainly striving to wriggle out of her heavy coat. She relieved her mistress of the encumbrance. "The tea's strong enough as it is. It won't be any better for standing."

Aunt Susan took the hint. Sheila began to realize that the missing "head" of the elder sister, alluded to by Mrs. Meakens, had been transferred to more capable shoulders. Hannah was mistress in the house.

The meal passed happily in disjointed conversation. How was—might she call him Sandy? Sheila heartily approved. She noticed, too, that Miss Travers, in her drifting questions, seemed anxious to learn the type of man whom her niece would marry rather than his worldly prospects. She was glad to hear he was "good-tempered"—especially as his hair was "red." Sheila objected to this description. It was darker than that—copper-coloured.

And tall? She had always liked tall men. The kind eyes grew a shade wistful. Sheila wondered if, years ago, Romance had passed on fugitive wing, and brushed lightly those soft cheeks. Her heart warmed to the little lady. Although she was longing to be off for her first peep at Crosskeys, she lingered in the warm room, grateful for the kindly welcome. At last, to her great joy, Aunt Susan reminded her.

"Don't stay out after dark. It closes in so early now. Have you galoshes? Oh dear!—and the paths so slippery. But your boots seem strong. Would you like my umbrella?"

Sheila refused the stout weapon, and breathed a sigh of thankfulness as she closed the garden gate.

The short cut across the fields, where the ragged path was full of slides, filled her with a sense of adventure. Snow lay upon the land, but the midday sun had thawed the tops of the briers, where bright berries gleamed amidst a tangle of thorny branches. She quickened her steps. Now she could see, above a plantation fringed by a wall, the tall chimneys rising up from which wisps of smoke floated. The path brought her to the back of the straggling house with its modern wing added on by Mr. Travers, the first sign of his rising fortune. But Sheila wanted to see the lawns sloping down to the flower garden divided by a holly hedge from its neighbour, sacred to fruit and green stuff, and where the gnarled walnut-tree marked her own little patch, surrounded by cockle shells.

She arrived at the long stone wall and paused for a moment, summoning courage.

"I *must* get in. There used to be a door somewhere." She stole on under the friendly shadows. At last she saw its

painted woodwork with the blisters left by the summer sun, which she used to "pop" when no one was looking. Almost as good as the fuchsia buds!

She tried the latch. It rose to her touch. Cautiously holding her breath, she stole through the arched doorway. There was no one in sight. To her left were the stable buildings, devoid of life, and the yard swept free from the snow and wet where a carriage had been washed. On she went with sparkling eyes, past the pigsties and outhouses, crouching down as she heard voices from the distant kitchen quarters. Now she had reached the inner wall dividing the back premises from the gardens in front of the house.

Here she met with her first check. For the door was firmly closed against her. Locked! A sense of being foiled at the height of her purpose drove away all her remaining scruples. In the darkening light she examined the stones, rough hewn, that fringed the doorway. She had got in this way before, with Rex to give a helping hand. Up she went, her toes thrust into convenient crevices until she sat astride the wall. She drew a deep breath of relief and stared ahead with eager eyes.

Swathed in its soft mantle of snow the lawn appeared fairy-like, with its background of silvery trees against the dusky twilight blue. Even the straggling stone house had acquired magic. Ear to ground, it stooped to the slope like a listening ogre, heavy-shouldered and impressive. No lights gleamed in the windows. No one stirred in the silent paths. It seemed to the girl that her old home was sunk in a profound slumber awaiting the kiss of its lost princess to rouse it again to life and love.

How dear it was! She caught her breath, straining her neck for a better view.

The first disillusion seized her. Gone were the wide French windows leading down by a pair of steps from the low drawing-room to the garden. In their place loomed a monstrosity of frost-bound glass with iron scroll-work and a cupola painted green: a hideous, modern conservatory.

"It's horrible!" She cried it aloud, shattering the cold silence.

"What's horrible?"

She gave a start that very nearly disturbed her balance, and clutched at the snowy stones. The voice was so close, with its ring of amusement. For the first time she became aware of an interested spectator. He sat on a little damp bench, his pipe in his hand, his head thrown back as he peered up at the intruder.

Retreat seemed the only course. She drew up the dangling leg, painfully aware of the length of stocking beneath her skirt, and prepared for a hurried descent.

"I think, before you go," said the man, "you might satisfy my curiosity." The voice was pleasant, rather drawling, with a faint Scotch accent audible in the clearly rolled r's. "And why you prefer to climb a wall when you can go through a door?"

"It's locked." She fell into the trap.

"No. It sticks—that's all!" He laughed and emptied the bowl of his pipe, tapping it against his heel. "I expect you didn't know that. Are you staying here?"

She shook her head. She wondered who the man could be.

"Just paying a call?" he suggested.

The obvious fun of the remark caught her fancy. She risked the truth, drawn by his friendly attitude.

"As a matter of fact, I'm trespassing."

"Good. Don't let old Blundell see you. He's sensitive about his rights." He rose to his feet with a leisurely movement, slipped his pipe into his pocket, and came nearer, halting below her. He had a brown, sleepy face and long blue eyes, under shaggy brows, that were bubbling over with quiet mischief. He seemed to be enjoying himself. "Since you've told me so much, mayn't I hear the rest of this exciting story? I promise I won't give you away. I'm only here for the night, on my way to Aberdeen—Blundell's son is a friend of mine—though in case you should get run in I should just have time to bail you out."

"That's very kind!" She could not resist the twinkle in those deep blue eyes. She explained the object of her visit. He nodded his head, interested.

"And what's 'horrible'?" he asked.

"*That!*" She waved to the glass structure. "How dare they build it and spoil the lawn?"

The man below gave a little chuckle.

"You should see it inside. It's a dream. Plants and rickety cane chairs and a nice little carpet with a fringe. Blundell calls it the 'winter garden,' and you're not allowed to drop ashes about. That's why I smoke at a safe distance." He paused for a moment. "So you're Miss Travers? I've heard of you. You're to marry Hinkson."

"You know him?" She stared, surprised and glad. The light was failing rapidly, yet he could just make out her face, warm and rosy with exercise, and the dark ruffled cloud of her hair. She looked, he thought, like a happy child.

"I've met him with a chap called Ryan. We both live in the Temple. My name's Alexander Crombie. They call me 'the other Sandy'—we have a lot of friends in common. I've even seen your photograph. Odd, meeting you like this." He broke off suddenly and turned his head. "There's some one coming. I fancy it's Blundell *père*. Wait a moment—I'll help you down." He tugged at the refractory door. Before he had time to get it open, Sheila had dropped to the ground.

They faced each other, laughing and breathless.

"You go back and keep him talking. I'm off! And mind you close that door!"

"Yes—but look here, where do you live?" He meant really where was she staying.

"London!" she laughed back over her shoulder, already slipping away from him.

"Then we're sure to meet." He enjoyed the joke, watching her double across the open to the shadows thrown by the shrubbery. Then, mindful of his office, he turned to intercept his host, a little regretful that the adventure had been brought so speedily to a close.

"Won't Sandy be amused," thought Sheila as she retraced her steps, luckily without detection. "'Crombie'—I mustn't

forget the name. He looked a sportsman. I'm glad I met him and not the owner of the house. 'A nice little carpet with a fringe.' I don't think he's enjoying his visit." She paused for a moment in the archway of the outer wall, and her spirits fell as she gave a last look backwards. "I do *hate* their having it—those Blundells! They don't deserve Cross-keys." She felt the helpless melancholy of the disinherited and sighed. "I shan't come here any more. It hurts too much." Her eyes filled.

Soberly she made her way home to The Firs. It was quite dark by the time she reached the house. She decided to keep her exploit secret, but she questioned her aunt about the people who had bought the old home.

It appeared that they thought a lot of themselves. Blundell was an ironmaster. He had got into trouble with hunting neighbours for wiring his hedges. Sheila scowled. He would, a man like that, she thought. But they were fairly charitable towards village institutions. Miss Travers generously admitted that the rector liked them. They had also "improved Cross-keys."

Sheila shuddered, but held her tongue.

This was easy with Aunt Susan, who prattled on with many digressions in her involved recollections, delighted to have a home audience weather-bound, as the snow returned and lay in drifts on the country roads. Sheila's thoughts turned to Sandy dolefully. There would be no hunting.

But, as the long days wore on, her first feeling of sympathy for the roundabout, vague little lady deepened into a real affection. For of one thing there was no doubt. Aunt Susan had a heart. It was so big that, possibly, the Almighty had seen fit to reduce the normal proportion of brains. She possessed an intensely untidy mind, which gathered up crumbs of information and dropped all important knowledge. It strayed hopelessly in its methods. She never completed any task, but midway began another with a flurried "That must wait." Hannah, prowling in her wake, finished the dusting of the china, added the water to the flowers wilting in

their empty vases, checked her mistress to button her boots—forgotten when she fastened her veil—and gathered up the floating ends of the latter, left to their own sweet will whilst Aunt Susan searched for her gloves.

What never failed was her charity. Every one in trouble sought her, from the village drunkard to the rector. She never probed into the past to discover the reason for "God's wrath," but proceeded at once to comfort the victim with all the love in her pitiful heart.

Sheila recognized that the speech anent her mother's "expensive" present had been said without a grain of malice. Although she disliked her sister-in-law, she gave her generously her due. Had Mrs. Travers stooped to quarrel, it is probable that both the sisters would have "had it out" and "made it up," but she kept them serenely at arm's length, fenced in by her "dignity." Sheila tried to bridge the gulf in vain. There is nothing so obstinate as a family misunderstanding.

She found in her aunt some unlooked-for tastes and an undeveloped love of beauty. Over the parlour mantelpiece hung a framed series of picture post cards, the result of a holiday trip of the Meakenses to the Engadine. She studied these one bitter evening, warming her toes at the fire.

"Those glaciers look rather chilly. Have you ever been to Switzerland?"

"No." There was regret in the word.

"But you'd like to go?" Sheila smiled.

"Don't let's talk of it, my dear. There's no chance of such a thing, though I've always longed all my life to see a real snow mountain. I think it must be wonderful! With the blue ice and the pink sunsets." She believed implicitly in the post cards.

"You'll have to come, with Sandy and me."

Miss Travers shook her head. Still, she added the daring thought to the vague dreams in which she indulged in restful moments, between her "duties."

Sheila felt a secret pity. What a dull life Aunt Susan led. Yet she seemed to be contented.

"We went there one summer. Rex came with his friend, Jimmy." She launched out into descriptions of long climbs, from the starting-point at the hotel in the hush before dawn, over the dark silent roads, with the tinkling bells of the carriage ponies, to the moment when, after the first ascent, the ashen glamour of the scene gave place to the delicate flush of the sunrise straining to meet them across the peaks.

Miss Travers listened, breathless. There were tears in her eyes when Sheila paused.

"My dear, what an exquisite experience. It reminds me of a poem." Falteringly she began some lines, culled from an anthology, which had lingered in her mental rag-bag.

This was how Sheila learned that her aunt loved poetry.

"Little things," she explained. "I've never been able to read Browning or Shelley. I go astray in them—the serious poems—they're so hard. But I like"—oh, strange assortment!—"Keats and Mrs. Hemans and Cowper. And Wilkins—no, Ella something—a long name? I've forgotten!"

Sheila, before she went to bed, wrote a letter to her father. Three days later a box appeared filled with slim, well-bound volumes, bearing the golden names of poets.

Aunt Susan wept for joy, and covered them all with brown paper. She became more absent-minded than ever, and forgot the joint for Sunday's dinner. Hannah read her a fine lecture.

"Mooning about among them books, and ye haven't even fed the canary! Nothing but 'usks in his cage, and the tap left running in the pantry. As if the place weren't littered up enough as it is for one pair of hands. I've no patience with Miss Sheila."

Still her hard-featured face was regretful when the last day dawned. She filled Sheila's bath slowly and delivered her mind of a burden.

"Miss Susan ain't what she were. She don't get enough change. I've spoken to Mrs. Meakens about it, but *she's* wrapped up in her own affairs. I'd like to see Miss Susan go to the sea for a fortnight this summer. If she didn't give so

much away to people as don't 'alf deserve it she'd be able to stand the extry expense. She could shut up the house and save my food. I'd be glad of a holiday meself. She needn't worrit about *me*!"

"I think it's an excellent idea. Suppose I talk it over with Father?" Sheila saw another way.

"Ay, you speak to Master Travers. He were never a close-fisted man." Hannah disdained subterfuge.

Aunt Susan was in a fever of preparation to speed the parting guest. She had half cut the sandwiches hours before the time appointed, lost her galoshes, and strapped up her own umbrella with Sheila's rug. Yet she forgot all these worries when she saw her niece's bright face cloud as she read a hurried letter from London in her father's hand. Her mother was ill—a bad cold with a temperature. Mr. Travers was anxious. He hoped it was not influenza. Of course they had sent for the doctor. He would wire Sheila in the morning to stop her going on to the Broomes' if her mother were any worse. If not, she could take it for granted that no news meant good news and proceed to Cropley Manor.

It shadowed the few remaining hours; but at twelve o'clock hope revived. There had been no telegram. Sandy was safe from disappointment.

The girl had been divided in mind between her anxiety for her mother and the thought of her neglected lover. It had revived suddenly all her old longing to see him. Letters were "stupid things." She wanted Sandy, with Sandy's smile and the eager light in his brown eyes.

Aunt Susan saw her off, trudging bravely through the snow, the galoshes having turned up unexpectedly in her knitting bag, together with some spectacles "lost for months"! It seemed to the roundabout little lady that here was the hand of Providence.

In front of them marched the porter, the luggage piled upon a barrow. He was still stinging from Hannah's tongue. As usual, he had arrived late. They had "walked out" for seven years, and Hannah possessed an engagement ring which

she kept in a plush Easter egg on her mantelpiece. She never wore it. It "got in the way, washing up." But all the village knew about it. With this Tam M^cGregor had to content his yearning towards matrimony.

His fiancée's private view of the case was that she didn't "want a husband, but folks can't say I've never been asked."

It was a hall-mark of attraction which stamped her in spiteful feminine eyes and left her defiant of the years. Tam, who was careful of his money and had his settled bachelor habits, was reconciled to the situation. If twitted, he would remark darkly that they could "wait for Miss Susan's death." She was sure not to "forget my girl."

The notion gilded his romance.

CHAPTER VIII

SHEILA saw Sandy standing, his head thrown back, shoulders squared, in the middle of the platform, when the train, half an hour late, steamed into the country station. His face was tense with expectation and the girl felt a sudden pride sweep over her. Against the snow, with his height and his finely-cut features, he looked such a gallant gentleman.

"Sandy!" she called excitedly as she struggled with the door.

He sprang forward and wrenched at the handle; their hands were clasped as she stepped down, yet he did not attempt to kiss her. She felt rather taken aback.

"You all right?" His voice was abrupt. "Where's your luggage?" He seemed to be in a state of suppressed excitement. Gathering up her dressing-case he hurried her off to the van where a porter with slow precision was trundling a trunk on to the snow. "That yours?" As she acquiesced he gave instructions. "For Cropley Manor—the cart's outside. Here you are!" He tossed him a coin, seized Sheila's arm, and pressed forward. "I've brought the brougham—this way."

Sheila smiled. Here was Sandy "rushing things" in his old style. Yet the feeling of disappointment lingered.

But once inside the warm carriage, with its fur rug and hot-water tins, his manner changed.

"*Thank God!*" He lifted her bodily on to his knee as the coachman whipped up the horse and they wheeled into the country road. Half crushed in his strong embrace she protested laughingly, but he took his fill of kisses before he released her, flushed and breathless. "I'll never let you go

again. It's been—*hell*!" She felt him shudder. With a quick movement he pulled the pins out of her hat, tossed it aside, and leaned his cheek against her hair. Beneath her ear pressed to his shoulder she could hear the hard, quick beat of his heart.

"Poor old Sandy." She slipped an arm about his neck. "I've missed you too." She was touched by his evident distress. "Never mind! We're together again, and—— You're making me *so* untidy! I shan't be fit to be seen."

The anticlimax steadied him. He gave a sudden, husky laugh.

"Isn't that like a woman? I've a great mind to punish you by pulling out all these hairpins!"

"No—you *mustn't*!" She struggled up. "Sandy—please —let me go!" For his arms had tightened at her resistance.

In her warm face and sparkling eyes was a hint of temper. Sandy rejoiced.

"You look so ripping when you're angry. It's an awful temptation!" He kissed her neck above the soft fur collar. "There—I'll be good. I'm better now. You can sit up, prim, in your own corner."

She escaped with a little sigh of relief.

The carriage gave a sudden jolt, the wheels sunk in a snowy rut. Sheila peered through the window.

"I say, isn't it deep?"

"I know. I've been picturing you weather-bound in Northumberland. Hunting's off—every one's cursing! But I don't care, now." He propped his feet on the opposite seat and drove his hands deep down in his pockets, watching the girl with secret amusement. She had drawn out of her bag a mirror and was trying to tidy her ruffled hair. A few months ago, he thought, she would have tossed on her hat again, heedless of appearances. "Now, powder your nose!"

She glanced sideways and made a defiant grimace at him.

"I don't need any, thank you. I'm not one of your *Society* ladies!"

He went on imperturbably, ignoring her little shaft.

"You'll like the manor—a dear old place. It's packed this week, every corner full. They've put you in one of the tower rooms. It's the old part of the house, but I swore you weren't afraid of ghosts. I'm underneath, and the other room belongs to Fräulein. She'll chaperon us! A funny old duck who's been there for years and is now in charge of the youngest child. The Mostyns have come—you remember them? She's having a fine time with Desmond. Mavis looks on and laughs. It's a cheery crowd. I can tell you, old lady, it's been a bit trying this week-end watching all the little flirtations and being hopelessly out of it! But we'll give them a lead now, won't we?" He patted her knee under the rug.

Sheila laughed at the suggestion. Sandy looked so mischievous. Then her face clouded over. He noticed the change.

"What's wrong?"

"I've just remembered. Mother's ill." She gave him the morning's news. "There's no telegram waiting for me?"

"No—nothing. I should have seen it. There's a lot of influenza in town. Perhaps it's only a mild attack. I dined with your people last Thursday and your mother was looking very fit. She sent you her dear love and hoped you would have a good time. I don't think you need worry. Your father would send for you in a minute if anything were seriously wrong. You'd have heard by now. Cheer up!"

His sunny assurance comforted her.

"I'm glad you saw her before you left. You're sure she was well then?"

"Quite. Your father was chaffing her because she'd put on a new frock, and your mother was quite coquettish—in her dignified way. She's a pretty woman! I don't wonder he's fond of her. She'd had a letter from your aunt, who seems to have lost her heart to you."

"Aunt Susan?"

He nodded, smiling.

"Is she my 'Aunt Susan' too?"

"She's a dear!" Sheila began to describe her visit and Hannah's peculiarities. They laughed together, enjoying the jokes.

"Oh, and I met a friend of yours. I didn't tell you when I wrote; I was keeping it until I saw you." She told him gaily of her adventure "trespassing" at Crosskeys. "His name's Crombie, and he says that they call him 'the other Sandy.'"

Her lover gave her a quick glance.

"Crombie? Yes, I know the chap." It did not sound enthusiastic.

"Don't you like him? He looked so jolly." Sheila felt that the treasured story had somehow fallen flat.

"He's more a friend of Pat's than mine." It was non-committal. He turned the subject. "By the way, Pat's got a case—his first case! He's off his head with importance and full of the wildest dreams. He sees himself a millionaire laying his laurels at the feet of Mrs. Frost, who's in town, staying with some friends at Chelsea and rather bored—artistic people. So Pat's been whipped in again as a comic relief from high thinking—which seems to include uncertain food! He takes her out to restaurants and drives her home in a hansom, where he's allowed to hold her hand. Then he walks back to the Temple to save his bus fare—poor devil! Though I don't know whether he's much to be pitied. Seems to suit his temperament." Sandy gave his joyous chuckle. "He finds the Embankment an 'inspiration'—reels off poems by the score with Whistlerian effects and presents these trophies to the bland widow, already fed up with the Chelsea atmosphere."

Sheila looked amused but indignant.

"I don't like Mrs. Frost. She's not playing the game with Pat. If she doesn't mean to marry him, why can't she leave him alone?"

"Oh, she's perfectly harmless," laughed Sandy. "It's my principal objection to her! She's what is known as a 'good woman'—takes everything that's offered and gives nothing in

return. Keeps a running account in heaven, where her virtue's banked. She's never likely to go bankrupt, like Cara, through love——" He broke off. "Here's the lodge! Look out. It's rather pretty."

A woman was holding the gate open. She curtsied, catching sight of the girl peering eagerly through the window. The wheels scrunched over gravel under a thin film of snow, the rest swept to the sides of the road, where it stood in heaps, serenely white. White, too, was the broad park and the loaded trees that spangled it, as they mounted slowly the gentle incline, passed a small plantation of firs where the bailiff's cottage sent up a spire of thin grey smoke on the frosty air, swung round a sharp curve with a knot of oaks, and, behind this, caught their first glimpse of the house. It looked massive and imposing, with its straggling wings added on at various periods, and it was capped by a high tower with a ragged outline, due to the heavy old ivy, now deeply encrusted with snow. They drew near to the pillared front with circular steps that swept out invitingly where the drive widened into a broad patch of gravel.

"What a lovely place! Am I tidy?" Sheila's voice was rather anxious.

Sandy smiled and tenderly tucked away a truant curl under her little velvet toque.

"You're perfect. Fresh as a little robin! Hop out." For the carriage had stopped.

A manservant opened the doors. Sheila, a shade nervous, mounted the sanded steps, where the frost had been foiled in its slippery purpose, and passed through an outer hall to one beyond. It was full of people. A woman rose from the fireside.

"Here you are! You poor child, aren't you frozen?" Mrs. Broome advanced and guided Sheila through the crowd to the warm glow. "Come and unthaw. Sandy has pictured dreadful things—snowdrifts and buried trains." She laughed up at the tall figure in Sheila's wake. "I must say he looks rather happier now."

The girl, divested of her wraps, found herself in a snug corner, a little apart from the other guests. Her momentary shyness passed.

It flashed across her instinctively that here was the right welcome. She remembered, with a sense of discomfort, her arrival at Mrs. Meakens' and all the intolerable fuss which included the curiosity, thinly-veiled, of a pair of neighbours who had "dropped in" for a cup of tea. Mrs. Broome reminded her in some subtle way of her mother. She smiled with the same easy assurance. In that moment she had a glimmering of her mother's life in those early years of struggle in Northumberland.

She asked rather anxiously if a wire had come for her, explaining the reason for it.

Mrs. Broome reassured her. There was not even a letter waiting.

Tea was brought with a little table, set conveniently at her elbow. Her hostess led Sandy aside whilst his cousin, Desmond, chatted to Sheila, discussing the bare chance of a thaw. The meet to-morrow had been postponed. It looked very bad for sport.

She liked his jolly red face under its thatch of stubborn hair, the way he moved, and his loud voice that yet held a note of good-breeding. He belonged to his setting; the sturdy type of simple country gentleman, rough-hewn yet suggesting the fact that for centuries past men of his name had straddled in front of the wide fireplace conscious of their right to it, and at the same time aware that it involved a responsibility towards those dependent on them. They had their vices and their virtues and revealed both, supremely careless of the opinions of their neighbours, modifying their tendencies to suit the habits of the period: a class difficult to replace in an era of change, and which may be regretted when superseded by the result of money and brains and all that tends to a swift and purely modern success. For position acquired by a hard battle does not always breed kindliness, and a tact that is not inherited but finds its roots in education is apt to fail at a

critical moment. In this lies the latent sneer of the working-class for an "upstart."

Meanwhile Mrs. Broome was talking in an anxious undertone to Sandy, at a little distance from them.

"Do you think we ought to tell her? The wires are down. I heard it this morning. It's probably worse farther North. We haven't had such a snowfall for years. They couldn't get a message through."

Sandy considered it silently.

"What's the use?" he said at last. "She'd only be frightfully upset. If Mr. Travers has sent for her—which we don't know—and she doesn't reply, or arrive, he'll guess and write here. She'd have the letter early to-morrow. I think we'd better wait for news. He's always nervous about his wife; she was all right when I left town. And Sheila would have a peaceful night. I'll send him a line to say she's here."

"Very well. It's for you to decide." Mrs. Broome looked relieved. "I'll warn Desmond to say nothing, or he's sure to go and blurt it out." She glanced at the pair in the chimney-corner. Mrs. Mostyn had strolled up to greet the new arrival and leant on the back of Sheila's chair. The girl was talking to them both, her face rosy and full of fun. From the host came a burst of laughter.

"Ha, ha! You've got me there. You *wait*—young lady!"

Sheila was enjoying herself.

"She's very pretty," said Mrs. Broome. "Is there Irish blood? Those blue eyes with their dark lashes seem to suggest it."

"I fancy there is—on the mother's side. She was a Courtenay—the Worcestershire lot."

Mrs. Broome nodded and smiled.

"You'll have to look after your laurels, Sandy. Desmond is making the running already."

Their eyes met, amused and friendly. It was an open joke in the house that the host loved a pretty face. But the Broomes were a very happy couple. No one could really

come between them. She moved back to the group by the fire.

"Nancy's found you out, I see." She looked from Sheila to Mrs. Mostyn, then sidelong at her husband. Sandy gave a rude wink.

"Nancy's keeping Desmond in order."

"I hope so," said the hostess. "I depend on her good influence."

Mrs. Mostyn, a pretty blonde, pretended to take this seriously.

"You always can, my dear Mavis."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Broome.

Sheila thought them very jolly, though she did not quite understand the drift of the little battle of words.

"Well, I'm going to carry Miss Travers off to her room, so you can start at once your scheme of regeneration," Mrs. Broome suggested sweetly. She turned to the girl. "The post goes at six o'clock, let me warn you, in case you want to write a letter." She guessed that Sheila would wish to tell her people of her safe arrival.

"Thanks. I must send a line to Mother."

They made their way through the hall, Mrs. Broome pausing at times to introduce the new guest, informally, to her other friends.

"And this is Ella. She's my baby." She stroked back the fair curls of a stolid young person with wide blue eyes who was teasing a kitten in the window. Sheila guessed her age to be four. "Say how-d'you-do, darling." The mother drew her forward, but the child hung back obstinately. "This lady is going to be a new cousin very soon. When she is married to Cousin Sandy."

The little girl's expression changed from that of stolid curiosity to startled wrath. Suddenly she gave a scream and flung herself down on the rug, her short bare legs in the air, kicking vindictively.

"Shan't! Shan't! Tandy's *mine*!" Her shrill protest rang through the hall.

Laughter followed in its wake; every one looked up, amused.

"Hullo! What's wrong?" Desmond shouted. He came striding across to the window. "Your sins have found you out, Sandy. You've been trifling with my daughter's affections!"

He watched his cousin bend down and pick up the struggling child.

"Don't you listen to them," said Sandy, kissing the round, wet cheeks. "It's all right. I'll have two wives. You shall live in the pigeon-house with the little red roof. You'd like that?"

"Yes." Her arms went round his neck.

Sandy winked across at Sheila, who was rather distressed by this sudden outburst, over the mop of fair curls.

"But send her away," the child demanded.

"Oh no, I want you both. Besides, she'll be useful—button your gaiters and tell you stories when it rains. Won't you, Sheila?"

"Rather!" The girl entered into the game. "Won't you ask me one day to a doll's tea-party, with the pigeons?"

"No. *Tandy* come!" She hugged him tighter, scowling at Sheila.

Mrs. Broome interposed.

"She's in one of her tiresome moods. I think she'd better go to Fräulein. Nurse is out for the afternoon."

"Then she shall ride there cock-horse," said Sandy. "Now, then, up you go." He settled her upon his shoulder. "Hold tight, Curly-tops!"

The pair made a charming picture. The man, full of youth and strength, and the child, half mollified, with conscious triumph on her face, her bare legs tightly grasped in the brown muscular hands.

"Gee up! Gee up, Tandy!" She drummed with her fist on his head.

"Yoicks for'ard!" shouted Desmond, his hands to his mouth.

Off they went, with Mrs. Broome and Sheila behind, laughing, relieved by the turn of affairs.

The mother warned the restive charger.

"Look out for the lamp! Is she quite safe?"

"Quite. Don't worry!" he called back.

Up the stairs raced Sandy, round the wide gallery which encircled the hall, and plunged forward down a narrow corridor. The little girl screamed with delight.

"Now, for the cunning old fox! We ought to have brought up the pups."

"Sandy, you mustn't!" Mrs. Broome tried, in vain, to be severe.

"I'm on the scent," said the hardened sinner. "Oranges and yards of knitting! We'll run her to earth, don't you fear." He paused before a green baize door. "Mph!" he sniffed. "She's in there! Steady on the curb, old lady, you're throttling me." He pranced, waiting for Sheila to turn the handle, fearing to loosen his grip on the rider.

"Gone away!" He plunged through, into an octagonal space where a shaft of light bore down from a latticed window high above. They were standing in the tower.

Up the twisting steps he went, more cautiously, for they were worn, with sharp angles, until he came to the landing above and halted, breathless.

"Fräulein, are you at home?" His cheery voice echoed through the enclosed space and seemed to lift the faint, prevailing sense of gloom cast by the deep old walls. "Is it permitted to knock at the door—the august door?" he whispered back.

But before his hostess had time to reply, it opened, in answer to his summons. A grey-robed lady, bespectacled and shapeless, beamed at him, framed in the narrow arch.

"Zo? You bring ze liddle truant. Komm, my child." She lifted her down. "Zay 'dank-you'—brettily."

Ella solemnly obeyed. She feared Fräulein, and no one else. Least of all, her own parents.

"Thank *you*, Fräulein." Sandy gave the stout lady a

gallant glance. "Hot work! She's ruined my collar." He ran a finger ruefully round it.

"Ah, you zpoil her—alvays, Zir Filgate." She glanced curiously at his fiancée, her prominent eyes sentimental.

Mrs. Broome introduced them.

"I've told Miss Travers that if she feels lonely upstairs she's to come to you. I leave her in your hands, Fräulein. I know you will look after her."

The old governess was pleased. She explained that for many years she had slept peacefully in the tower.

"And you've never seen a ghost?" laughed Sheila.

Fräulein did not believe in ghosts. There were bats—"flitter-mice" she called them—harmless creatures. That was all.

Sheila remembered the letter home.

"If I don't write soon I shall miss the post, and I haven't unpacked," she reminded Sandy. He nodded and left her with Mrs. Broome. They moved on with a last word to Fräulein, wedged in the doorway, hand in hand with the little girl.

"She's a dear old thing," the hostess murmured. "So thoroughly responsible. She used to teach my elder children, before they went to school abroad, and now Ella's nearly ready. I believe in learning languages young." She panted from the steep climb as they reached, at last, Sheila's room, passing Sandy's midway, the door ajar with a vision of boots in an endless row, just inside. "Here we are. I do hope that you'll be fairly comfortable. It was so annoying the Mostyns coming at the last moment—after refusing. And I can't put a married couple here. But Sandy said that you wouldn't mind."

"Why, I think it's charming." The girl looked round her, pleased and inwardly surprised. It was bigger than she had imagined, with window-seats on either side, and above them, in the panelled walls, were latticed casements through which poured a mellow light tinged with pink from the distant sunset over the snow. Quaint chintzes brightened the room and

were frilled round the roof of the narrow four-poster; a bright fire burned in the grate and, before it, a low arm-chair was placed near to a table with books and papers and materials for letter-writing. Her trunk, unstrapped, was in a recess. On the low dressing-table stood a glass filled with hot-house flowers, a lovely old Worcester tray, and a pair of Cromwellian candlesticks. Everything was in keeping with the old-world atmosphere.

"Then I shall leave you in peace," said her hostess. "When your letter's ready, ring the bell and the maid will see that it's put in the bag. She can return and unpack for you."

She was off, with a parting wave of her hand, but paused again on the threshold, with a mischievous look at the young girl.

"Observe the flowers! They're the nearest thing we could find to orange-blossom." She pointed to the stephanotis. "Which reminds me, may I call you 'Sheila'?"

"Please do." The girl coloured. "I think it's so kind of you to have me." She added, rather shyly, "I've been looking forward to my visit."

"I hope it will be one of many." Mrs. Broome's voice was cordial. "Sandy comes here whenever he likes—to his tower room. It's kept for him. You know he's had no home for years—except ours—poor boy! Sir Reginald was a casual guardian; in *every* way——" She hesitated. "Anyhow, we're all of us glad that Sandy's found a wife at last—and intends to settle down!" She smiled purposely on the words, watching Sheila's happy face.

"I'm not sorry myself," laughed the girl. Her hostess saw that she had missed the undercurrent in the speech.

"I wonder how much she knows," she thought as she picked her way down the winding staircase. "I'd no idea she was so young. I wish——" She thrust the notion aside. "But I didn't like to turn Sandy out. There's Fräulein to stop any silly chatter. Of course! How Desmond would laugh at me! And I think Sandy means it—*this* time."

. . . . . .

Before she climbed into her bed Sheila drew back the curtains and gazed out through the diamond panes of the window, closed with its quaint old latch. The moon was shining from under a cloud with a wan and bluish light over a world carved in marble that stretched into infinite space below. For the tower rose, square and solid, high above the irregular roof of the building, and twisted chimneys peered up to meet her downward gaze, half buried in drifts of snow. It was bitterly cold and the wind swayed the frozen tops of the plantation and whistled round the ivied walls with an eerie wailing note, like the cry of an outlawed spirit.

She was glad to snuggle down beneath the eider-down in the warm firelight, but she felt no inclination to sleep. It had been an exciting evening and a curious contrast to the last spent with her old aunt in the cottage near Crosskeys.

The sense of colour and light and laughter; the gleaming shou ders of the women in their delicate evening frocks; her host's big voice that dominated—and capped—the frequent merry jokes; above all, her own knowledge that she had played no minor part among the host of gay people had gone to her head like sparkling wine. She had worn a poppy-coloured dress with little red shoes and "Mother's pearls." Sandy had said that she looked like a flame—a divine flame of love and youth. He had pretended laughingly that he dared not come near because she "scorched" him; but they had stolen some precious minutes in Mavis' boudoir—she called her "Mavis" and wondered at her own daring—and Sandy had said he was "proud" of her. That had made the evening perfect.

In the stillness of the house she could hear him moving about below. The clock pointed to past midnight. Fräulein had long since gone to bed. As she passed the "august door," candle in hand, Sheila had caught steady snores issuing from the good soul's room. Sandy had come up a little later. She had smiled when she heard his shoes thrown down. Nothing could disturb Fräulein; she slept the sleep of the just and well-fed.

Sheila's eyes stole round the room, picturesque in the glow of the coals, piled generously in the grate. Over the narrow mantelpiece was a circular mirror, convex, that reflected in miniature her bed, and she gazed into it, amused at the tiny presentment of herself. With an instinct of vanity she drew up the masses of her hair and spread them out on the pillow and the rose silk eider-down. They reached far below her waist, and her face looked absurdly childish with its flushed cheeks and wide blue eyes against the soft dark cloud.

Suddenly she raised her head, puzzled by a sound without. Some one was coming up the stairs. It couldn't be! She held her breath. She knew that her room was the last in the tower, save for an attic where lumber was stored under the high roof.

And yet—— She listened, her heart beating. It seemed uncanny at that hour.

Then she heard it again distinctly: the creak of the stairs and a light step. She sat up, clutching the bedclothes, and gave a quick gasp of relief as a familiar voice outside whispered:

"Are you awake, old lady?"

Sandy! What a fool she had been to take her lover for a ghost. That was the first thought that struck her.

"Yes, what is it?" she answered softly, surprised yet glad of a human presence driving away her shadowy fears.

"I can't sleep and I've nothing to read. I wondered if you could lend me a book."

"Rather. I've heaps. Wait a minute and I'll slip one out through the door." She looked round for her dressing-gown. But Sandy checked her.

"Don't get out, if you're in bed. Stay where you are—you'll be catching cold. I'll come in and get it myself." He turned the handle as he spoke.

"Cheek of Sandy!" thought Sheila. She burrowed down beneath the clothes, half amused, half annoyed. The next moment she saw his face, full of mischief, peep through the opening.

"You don't mind?" He took it for granted and advanced, smiling. "By Jove, what a ripping fire! Mine's gone out.

I'm shivering." He closed the door cautiously and moved forward to the blaze, spreading out his hands before it, tall in his dark dressing-gown, girdled about like a monk's habit.

"I didn't say you might come in." She peered over the eider-down. "The books are there—on that table."

Sandy turned round and chuckled.

"You're a hospitable old party! You might have a little pity. My teeth are chattering in my head, whilst you're lapped in luxury. I won't stay two minutes. Have I Your Majesty's permission to seat myself in this arm-chair?"

She laughed, for he looked so comical. After all, what did it matter?

"I'll 'permit' it. For a minute."

"Well, keep your eye on the clock. Then you can shout aloud for Fräulein. She won't hear you—worse luck! It's her gentle breathing that keeps me awake." He pulled up the chair to the fire and propped his feet on the fender, in their red morocco slippers, his head flung back against the cushion. "I can see you in the glass. You look ripping—what jolly hair! I'd no idea it was so long." He smiled up at the round mirror.

Sheila childishly waved her hand, watching the reflected action. Sandy promptly waved back. They laughed simultaneously. Then his finger went to his lips.

"Sh! We mustn't make a row. Not that anyone could hear us—we're safe in the old tower. Still, it's better to be careful. It's rather a lark my being here, isn't it, Sheila? Picture Fräulein's fat face if she knew. She'd burst with Teutonic propriety! '*Colossal!*' I think I'll smoke." He dived down into the pocket of his pyjamas for his case. "It won't give the show away—every woman smokes now. Have one?" He twisted round. "Yes, *do*! Be companionable. I always hate smoking alone." He sprang up and came across, holding out the cigarettes, but she shook her head.

"Not in bed. It isn't safe." She waved him away.

"Afraid of the curtains? Or your hair?" His eyes wandered over it, where he stood leaning against the post

farthest from her. "Perhaps you're wise. And you look such a dear as you are." He put out his hand and smoothed the tips of the dark locks wonderingly. "It's so alive—I can feel it tingle." His eyes came back to her face. "I like you in bed. You're prettier far even than you were to-night, in all your flame-coloured glory." He smiled. "You're making a poet of me! I shall be cutting out old Pat."

"Then you'd better go back to your room and write." Some half-formed instinct warned the girl. "I want to get to sleep now."

"You don't look a bit sleepy. And I haven't had my two minutes." He sat down on the edge of the bed, the desire to smoke already forgotten, and began to play with her hair. He gathered it up in a handful and buried his face in the soft mass.

"It's scented." His voice was muffled.

"It isn't!" She was indignant at once. "You know I never use scent. It's a pet aversion of mine. Perhaps it's the stuff in the shampoo. I think they add lemon verbena."

"Anyhow, it's heavenly." He breathed it in, leaning sideways, his weight propped on one elbow.

She tried to draw her hair away.

"You're making it in such a tangle. Do go, Sandy. I'm tired."

"But I must have my reward first." He raised his head. His face was white; there were hot, flickering lights in his eyes. "Kiss me——"

She pushed him back. Her sudden resistance angered him. Now he would have his own way. His arm slipped beneath her shoulders roughly, his mouth closed on hers.

The scene was unpremeditated. His excuse had been a genuine one. Sleep had failed him from the outset, Fräulein's snoring an aggravation of his already excited mood, due to the gaiety and wine and the presence of the girl he loved.

But Sandy had never learnt the lesson of self-control that stands by a man in his hour of temptation. He had taken his pleasures carelessly, on the impulse of the moment. It had become a fixed habit. No scruple seized him now. As

the girl shrank away, startled and hurt by his sudden roughness, he began to talk rapidly, in a husky murmur, still holding her, powerless in his strong arms.

"What's the use—when you love me? In another month you'll be my wife. Let me stay? Just to-night. I promise you I won't harm you. Oh, Sheila, I love you so! I can't go now—I *can't*, darling! What are a few words in church? They don't in the least alter *us*. It's only the official sanction. That's not marriage. This is." He kissed her again in the curve of her neck. "When we love each other as we do—— It's human nature. No one will know——"

"*Sandy!*" She struggled to escape. "You're mad! You don't know what you're saying."

"Yes, I do." He tried to soothe her. "You don't understand. I'll tell you." His lips against her ear, he whispered, shaken with passion, incoherent . . .

Horror and shame overwhelmed her. She put forth her whole strength and wrenched herself from his weakened grasp. She was out of bed and across the room before he recovered from the shock. The instinct to escape from him sent her to the nearest window. She sprang up and tore at the latch. The wind streamed in, blowing out the thin folds of her single garment. Desperately she clutched at it.

"If you come a step nearer me, I shall throw myself out!"

He saw she meant it. It sobered him like a cold douche.

"For God's sake, come back!"

He stood erect, rigid with fear, picturing that awful drop from the height of the tower with the swiftness of vision which imagination intensifies. The wind whistled round the room and drew a great puff of smoke out of the wide old chimney, beating down the flickering flames and throwing the room into sudden gloom. Sandy, through the smarting mist, could see the girl, tense with fear, one bare foot on the ledge of the window. Mutely she pointed to the door.

He backed slowly, his face haggard.

"Sheila—forgive me! I lost my head. Let me explain? I'm—sober now."

He heard her sob, but she did not move.

"Go!" The word was choked out.

He reached the door, his courage broken.

"*Sheila?*"

Her eyes, like a hunted hare's, followed his movements. He felt for the handle. As the door opened, he saw her hair in a dark cloud scatter wildly. She clung to the casement for support at the onslaught of the icy blast that swept across to the new exit. For a moment he thought that she would fall, and the risk brought a groan from his lips. He slipped through and closed the door, his shoulders against it, his shaking hands striving to prevent the bang.

Then he crouched on the mat, with bent head, ear pressed to the crack.

"Thank God!" He had heard the latch of the window grate into place.

"Sheila," he breathed through the door. He dared not raise his voice above a whisper, fearful of Fräulein below.

His heart gave a sudden leap. For he caught the patter of bare feet across the floor. Was she coming? Did a shred of hope remain?

With a scrunch the key was turned in the lock. He knew in that moment that he had lost her.

Still he waited. The cold of the tower seemed to eat into his flesh, but it was not colder than his heart. Yet beads of sweat stood on his forehead.

Later he heard stifled sobs. They cut into his consciousness with the sharpness of physical pain.

He beat on the panels.

"Let me in. For God's sake, Sheila! I can't bear it."

He heard her gasp. Then silence.

He pictured her listening, white and tense, with that terrible look of fear in her eyes, of knowledge and shame—his handiwork. His head sank down upon his hands. For the first time since the days of childhood, the tears trickled through his fingers. He paid in that hour the full price for all he had sown. A bitter reaping!

CHAPTER IX

THE endless night ebbed away. Through the windows, patterned with the frost, the first ashen light of dawn, earlier here in this northern land than in smoke-bound London, stole in, grey, outlining the panelled room, with its burnt-out fire and narrrow mantel, above which, in the convex glass, the familiar picture gathered shape, doll-like, with its tiny bed.

Sheila watched it with weary eyes. Her head throbbed from the long vigil; her limbs felt bound by invisible chains. The problem that had baffled her, after hours of blank despair, rose anew threateningly. Here was the day, and with its advent no settled plan of escape.

Yet she could not spend another night in the tower room. She shrank from the thought and from the gay crowd downstairs. Above all, from Sandy's presence.

Oh, to be safe at home again! With her mother's serene and tender smile and her father's strong kindliness. To blot out Sandy—and forget.

For love had gone down in fear and shame. She was filled with a deep mistrust of men, and her whole soul recoiled from marriage.

She had believed so implicitly in her future happiness, had felt so safe in her lover's hands. And now Sandy had betrayed her. Not only Sandy, life itself.

Tears rose again to her eyes. She brushed them away angrily. This was not the moment for weakness. She must learn to be brave and independent as in the days of her childhood. She sat upright in the tumbled bed and prayed, almost defiantly, for strength and guidance. It was her due. She

had done nothing wrong herself. It was Sandy's fault, from start to finish. If God were just, He would listen.

Then she tossed back the clothes and slipped down to the cold floor, pausing with a feminine instinct as she passed the looking-glass. Her face looked pinched, her eyelids swollen. Sandy's work. She hated him!

She brushed out her hair, full of tangles. As she raised her arm she saw that the sleeve of her nightgown was torn away from the shoulder. Her blue eyes went hard as steel. Setting her teeth at the first chill, she bathed herself in the icy water. It revived her physically. She had her father's wiry strength and quick power of recuperation, the inheritance of the middle classes where the blood still flows vigorous and unenfeebled by intermarriage. The thought of action was a tonic. She would go home. Nothing should stop her. She found a loophole of escape.

"I will make Mother the excuse. They know she's ill and that I'm anxious. Perhaps there'll be a letter this morning. That's the best idea at present."

She dressed herself in her travelling clothes and settled down to her packing. Once she paused and listened intently, the old fear in her eyes. But no sound came from below. Her lover at last had fallen asleep, worn out by his remorse.

"I must get down before he stirs." Unconsciously she spoke aloud. "I shan't come into the tower again. I shall leave all the luggage ready."

As she hunted for her keys her eyes fell upon her ring, glittering in the frosty light. She folded it in a blank sheet of paper and enclosed the whole in an envelope, which she addressed in a firm hand to "Sir Filgate Hinkson."

"He'll understand." Her lips quivered. For suddenly, in her resentment, memory had played her a trick. Sandy's face, with his brown eyes, warm with love, rose up before her as he placed the pledge upon her finger.

He had been unusually grave that day, quoting from the marriage service, "'till death us do part,'" in that deep musical voice of his which seemed to match his clean-cut features.

But this parting was worse than death. It lacked all dignity and honour. There was no saving grace bestowed in the hope of a reunion hereafter. The memories that Time gilds with a pathetic tenderness were not for lovers that Life divided. The door on the past was closed by sin.

With the exaggeration of youth she used the word defiantly. For she felt her own purity impaired, and this was the bitterest sting of all. She was changed. Would her mother see it?

The new outlook swept away the thought of Sandy in fresh disaster. How would Sheila face her parents? She could give no reason for her conduct, nor explain the facts of the broken engagement. She shivered at the bare idea of anyone probing the shameful secret. What was she to say to them? Mother would never be satisfied. Father? Out of the heavy clouds came a single ray of light. It was odd that men should be so much simpler to convince. She had only to meet his eyes and say that, on her honour, she'd played fair. It was not her fault. He would believe her. But Mother? There was that hateful trousseau! Her face grew blank at the thought. All the expense; "real lace"—her mind spun round in a whirlwind—the wedding dress already fitted, and presents beginning to filter in. And she was bound to celibacy! For never, never would she marry and place herself in a man's power. She hated men. Except Father. And Father, of course, had married Mother.

Sheila started, eyes wide, the unfastened strap of the trunk in her hand. Mother had *known*—and had not warned her! Here was further treachery. Why had she let her daughter drift, unprepared, into marriage?

The girl found a bitter answer: "I've always been treated like a child!" The tyranny of parenthood that denies to its offspring a right to knowledge and to an equal reasoning power aroused anew her indignation. "It's not fair. It's not cricket!"

The old haunting phrase came back. "Girls can't play cricket." "They *can*." She hit her trunk with her fist. "If only they're allowed the chance. It's force and opportunity

that gives men an advantage. But one day we'll get it back." Unconsciously in that moment she revoked her old childish creed and the desire to "be born a boy"; her first glimpse of feminism.

At last everything was ready. She tidied the empty dressing-table, picking up a stray pin, and the scent of the stephanotis rose, sweet and cloying, to her nostrils.

"Orange-blossom!" Not for her. With an uncontrollable impulse she threw the flowers into the grate—a symbolic action, childish, sincere. Then with a last glance around her she slipped out of the haunted room, over the mat where Sandy had crouched and blamed the Almighty for giving Man not only passion but free will.

On tiptoe she passed his door. His boots, forgotten by the housemaid, were overturned on the threshold; brown boots, dear and familiar, that brought a sudden pang to her heart. She stifled the feeling, dismayed by it, conscious of depths as yet untouched, and reached at last the baize door.

A longing to escape from the house drove her on and across the hall. A servant was busy washing the flags. She stared up at the guest, surprised, down herself before her time through the vagaries of her bedroom clock.

"Do you want to go out, miss?" She scrambled up and wrestled with the heavy door. "I don't think it's unbolted yet."

Sheila nodded, forcing a smile.

"I'm early, but I couldn't sleep. So I'm going to have a brisk walk." It sounded cheerful and convincing.

She thanked the maid and passed out over the curved slippery steps into a morning frozen and still, with a pale sun that topped the firs yet held no warmth, but a vague promise.

Sheila shivered and turned up her collar as she tramped on down the drive, her mind busy with the problem of her first excuses to her hosts.

When she came to the wooded curve and rounded it, far away she saw a figure, dwarfed by the distance, coming to meet her across the snow. She watched the black dot

approach. It resolved itself into the postman. Here was a messenger from the gods! Surely there must be a letter?

She stood there, unconscious of the cold, until his peaked cap showed clear; then she turned and retraced her steps slowly, to give him time to join her.

Against the sky, banked with clouds like cotton-wool, forecasting snow, the frowning tower rose up, watching her grimly —a silent gaoler. It quickened her in her resolve. The blinds were down in Sandy's room, veiling the little latticed panes sunk in the deep, ancient wall.

So Sandy could sleep! There was nothing new, to him, in the night's episode. Her mind worked back to Mrs. Lester. If only she had understood—if Mother had told her. Well, never again! All men were bad. Sandy had said so.

The front door was wide open now. Other figures flitted about, drawing up blinds and sweeping the stairs.

A manservant caught sight of her and retreated to struggle into his coat, reappearing with a frown to take in the heavy mail. He resented the presence of a guest before his toilette had been completed. He handed the bag to the butler, who now appeared upon the scene.

"Is there anything for me?" asked Sheila.

"I'll see, miss." He proceeded slowly to unlock the bag. He seemed to take a malicious pleasure in levelling the little heaps, pausing over each address and conscious of his dignity.

Sheila's hand shot out.

"*That's* mine!" Her fingers closed on a square blue envelope directed in her father's writing.

Without waiting for any others she went out on to the steps and tore the letter hurriedly open. It was short and bore marks of haste. She gave a little gasp as she read. Her prayer had been answered, but in a way that checked for a moment the beat of her heart.

Her mother was dangerously ill. A sharp attack of pneumonia. Sheila must come home at once. Her father had wired the day before, but receiving no answer had guessed

the cause and was writing now to both addresses. He hoped she would catch the earliest train.

The girl stood there, white and dazed. This second blow was so unexpected. Her mother dangerously ill? And only a few minutes since Sheila had been condemning her. The thought pierced her like a sword.

Then the need for immediate action roused her out of her lethargy. With the letter clenched in her hand she turned back into the house. Some one was coming down the stairs with a heavy tread. It was her host. He greeted her with a cheery:

"Good morning! I see you're an early bird like myself. Would you care to come round the stables? I'd like to show you——"

She interrupted him, her voice strained and abrupt.

"I can't. I'm in such dreadful trouble. My mother's worse. It's pneumonia. I've just had a letter from Father. I must go home—by the first train."

"Indeed? I'm very sorry to hear it." His jolly face sobered at once. Her hand was gripped in his swollen fingers, enlarged by a recent attack of gout. "The next train?" He pulled out his watch and studied it thoughtfully. "We might do it. It's worth trying—if you don't mind a cold drive. I'm talking of the Scotch express."

His promptitude relieved her mind.

"I'm ready now."

He smiled gravely.

"That's good. I'll order the car. We shall have to pick it up at York, it's too late for the junction. There's no time for any packing, but you'll want all your warmest wraps. I'll lend you an extra coat."

"I've packed." The incriminating speech slipped out thoughtlessly. She flushed. "I had a sort of feeling—I'd been worrying——" The lie stuck.

He nodded, full of pity for her.

"Sandy can bring your luggage later. We must travel light. Unless he's up?"

"I d—don't think so." She stammered, confused.

He misunderstood her distress.

"You want to tell him? Is it wise? We must be off without delay."

She caught gratefully at the excuse.

"I don't think I'd better risk it. I'll go up and get my dressing-case."

Broome approved her self-denial.

"Good girl! I'll explain all round. Sandy will understand. Now, five minutes, no more. And tie on your hat," he called up the stairs. He allowed her ten in his mind, for he prided himself that he "knew women—always fussing round a veil."

Her punctuality surprised him as he bustled back from the dining-room, wiping his mouth suspiciously, to find her standing in the hall.

Before the door a long grey car was purring like a well-fed cat, and the chastened footman was holding out a fur-lined coat that fell about her in great folds as she slipped it on.

"Ready?" Her host advanced, beaming. "Mind how you go—the steps are frozen." He helped her in to the seat behind. "I shall drive myself. I know the road."

She nodded, her thoughts elsewhere.

"Why didn't I get that telegram?" she asked, as he tucked the rug about her.

"The wires were down with the snow." He had forgotten his wife's caution. He laid a flask upon her lap. "You're to drink that. It's cherry-brandy. And these are a few sandwiches—a bit rough, but you won't mind. You'll need them when we get to the moors. It's bad luck your missing breakfast."

"And you? Couldn't the chauffeur drive me?" She had suddenly realized his goodness.

"My dear child, it's a pleasure. The man's new. He might miss the way. Besides, I shall enjoy a spin. I'm only too sorry for the cause."

She could have kissed his round red face. He looked so solid and comforting.

"It's awfully kind of you," she breathed.

"Not at all." He clambered in, suggesting a huge benevolent bear in his shaggy motor coat. The man stood back; they were off, the loose snow frittering from the tyres. When they came to the lodge gates, he slowed down to take the turning. Then, down the hard white road they swept, regardless of the speed, with that sure hand at the wheel, economizing every curve.

At any other time in her life she would have gloried in the adventure, as the wind beat against her face and her body swayed to each throb of the car. For in those days but few and wealthy people went in for motoring, and the thrill of this rare experience was heightened for her by a touch of danger. But now the dead weight of her trouble pressed on her, forbidding pleasure. Yet she was grateful for the sense of swift movement, winged and free, that hastened her towards her goal and carried her far from the haunted tower. Hedges seemed to spin past and telegraph poles met and merged, dazzling against the pale sunshine, like a puzzle that evaded her. For Broome was taking a sporting chance with all the hardihood of his kind.

At length they reached the open moor. It stretched away before her eyes, starkly white like a frozen sea and wrapped in an Arctic silence, immeasurable, defying space under the wide bowl of the sky.

No shadow of nervousness possessed her. There was something so dependable in those heavy shoulders that broke her view, and in the set of the short neck above the weather-dashed fur collar. Here was a man whom one could trust in a crisis, true to his race and breeding. They stood to win or die together! The extravagant thought made her pulses quicken. The risk was a restorative.

On they went, with occasional jolts where the road was uneven and deep in snow. Luckily the hard frost had done more than crust the surface. Once the car skidded slightly.

"It's all right," Broome shouted.

The words reached her indistinctly above the uproar of the wind, but she smiled, gathering the intention. Her face ached with the cold, tears stood in her narrowed eyes. Yet an odd joy grew in her heart. Escape—and such a glorious one! Her youth was reasserting itself.

The road began to slope down, in wide loops, towards the valley. She heard the crunching of the brakes, the car went slower, the force of the wind seemed to falter and die away. She drew a deep breath, relieved. It was good to enter a wooded hollow, the strain relaxed, to wipe her eyes and to see again with undazzled vision clustering trees, serpent-like with their bare branches, from which at times little avalanches scattered, where the snow was thawed by the sunshine.

Broome turned his head sideways.

"Had your breakfast? Not yet? Well, eat it now while you can. We shall come to a ticklish bit soon. There's a dammed stream at the bottom and it crosses the road when the water's out. So long as it doesn't reach the engines, it's all right." She heard him chuckle.

Leaning across, she shouted back:

"I wish you'd have a sandwich yourself."

He shook his head. "Don't you worry! I got a drink before I started. Now just obey, there's a good girl. You'll have to keep up your strength, you know." By instinct he struck the right note. "Your father will depend on you."

"Yes." She slid back into her corner and opened the unwieldy packet. Thick slabs of tongue were wedged between the uneven slices of bread, with generous, frozen lumps of butter.

"I believe he cut them himself," she thought. "Bless him!" She took a mouthful.

To her surprise she found she was hungry. For only youth believes that love and sorrow can triumph over habit. Age knows better. Life goes on, stale, but in its normal grooves, however fickle the fates may prove, short of an actual dearth of money.

The cherry-brandy stung her throat but stole through her veins, warming her. The future became rosier. Defiantly she thrust away the memory of the last time she had tasted it, and Sandy's toast in the gloomy refreshment-room. She could live without him. Her head went up. The keen air and the spirit produced the sharp and pleasing sense of courage due to a slight intoxication. She rolled the paper into a ball and aimed it at a gate ahead. It reached its mark and she laughed aloud.

Actually laughed! Then with a start of self-reproach she remembered her mother. She leaned back, vexed and thoughtful.

"Here we are," boomed her host. "I think we'll risk it. What do you say?"

Across the road, in a damp hollow, lay a sheet of water, filmed with ice, broken by the thaw that haunts sheltered spaces near a stream.

"You know best," she called back. "It doesn't look deep to me."

"All right! We'll go slow." They splashed in, anxiously watching the water creep up, listening for the engine's throb. "Good business! We're through." The tyres bit the road beyond. "Now we've a straight run to York. Had some food?"

"Yes, rather. It was awfully good. I ate it all."

"Splendid!" He put on speed.

The fight with the wind began again. At last the town came into sight. She caught her first glimpse of the Minster. Now they were threading busy streets, people making way for them with the annoyed apprehension that prevailed in early motoring days. They drew up at the station.

Broome hailed his favourite porter.

"The London express. Is she signalled yet?"

"No, sir."

"We've done it, Sheila. He helped her down, his face triumphant. It was mottled, blue and red, his moustache stiff with his frozen breath. "You all right? Not dead with cold?"

"No. Your coat kept me warm. I'm so grateful." Her voice was shy. She felt relieved and rather giddy.

He tried to help her out of that garment, but his fingers were numb. He beat them together and stamped his feet on the ground.

"A ripping spin! I enjoyed it. Now, we'll see about your ticket."

The porter followed with her belongings. When they reached the long platform, Broome gave her a keen look.

"Keep that flask. You may want it. I'll explain everything to Mavis, so don't trouble to write letters. Sandy's sure to keep us informed. I'll send a wire to your father to tell him the train you're coming by. There'll be time for it after you start." He seemed to think of everything.

Sheila thanked him, fully aware of having upset his plans for the day. He waved her apologies aside.

"I've business in York, so it just fits in, especially as hunting's off. Afraid this frost looks like lasting."

Not a word about her mother save a last abrupt remark:

"Keep up your pluck. While there's life, there's hope." He added rather hurriedly, "Book a place for the first lunch."

But she saw through his reticence. In a sense it was a compliment. He treated her as a kindred spirit. The last vision she had of him as the train puffed out of the long station was his burly figure, very erect, legs apart, one gouty hand waving to her above his head, contemptuous of his neighbours' opinion, and the red face, lit like a lamp with his unvoiced sympathy.

She drew back into her corner and closed her eyes. It was over! She had made good her escape. Now she must think of her mother alone. Her full anxiety swept back. Yet her thoughts strayed at times to Sandy. Out of the tumult of revolt a paradox rose, startlingly clear. Sandy had said that all men were like him. Yet there was Broome; of the same type, descended from the same stock, fond of the pleasant things of life, not unmoved by a pretty woman—yet, in some deep way, different.

Dependable—that was the word.

Mavis knew it. It was the rock on which their happiness was built. They forgave each other daily trifles, conscious of this solid basis: a mutual trust and respect. You could count on Desmond in a crisis.

But, alas, you couldn't count on Sandy. Sheila's lips took a bitter curve. For Sandy had failed her, breaking faith. His love had been built on the sands of passion.

CHAPTER X

THE telephone bell rang sharply. Sheila rose to answer it. For her father had gone upstairs again to his vigil in the dressing-room adjoining his wife's bedroom, from whence he could hungrily watch the sweet, flushed face on the pillow without taxing the nurse's patience.

Sheila had coaxed him down to dinner, but after a few mouthfuls of soup he had got up without a word, nodded to her, and slipped away. She had been allowed to see her mother, but without hope of recognition. For Mrs. Travers was delirious. Her mind had gone back to early days. Sheila had caught one sentence distinctly as she bent over the restless form:

"They shall *not* interfere with John."

Her father had heard it too, his ears strained for the rambling speech.

"No, my darling. I'll see to that."

The familiar voice seemed to soothe her. She had drifted off to other matters, babbling softly about her "baby." The nurse had signed to Sheila to go, for the girl looked like breaking down.

The change in her father had struck her acutely. All his mind was concentrated on the fight for life in that quiet room. He had scarcely listened to his daughter's vexed and eager explanations of the delay in her return. Sandy's name had not been mentioned.

For this she was profoundly grateful. It was not the time to add trouble. Yet unwittingly her father had done so, with no intention of blaming Sheila, but uttering his thoughts aloud:

"She never ought to have wintered in England. I should have been firm. It's my fault."

The speech had come with the force of a blow to the listening girl.

"It's not. It's mine."

Her broken voice had caught his attention. He had blinked for a moment, collecting his wits.

"No, no. Don't worry, child. It's no good looking back." Then, with an anxious glance at the clock, "The doctor's coming again at nine."

Never in her life before had she felt of so little use, so powerless to help and comfort. She might have been a visitor as she wandered about the hushed house aimlessly, longing for work, yet too restless even to read. Time seemed to stand still.

When she went upstairs to her room, the first thing that met her eyes was a photograph of Sandy. He smiled at her with easy assurance. It was like meeting him face to face. She recoiled from the portrait, catching her breath. For it woke in her the old longing. Love could not die without a struggle. It was Sandy who had taught her love. He was still the one man who counted in her girlish experience. However much she resented the fact, she could not stifle memory.

She hid the picture in a drawer and hardened her heart deliberately. Had it not been for that chiselled face, those long hands, so warm and eager, and the charm of his deep and musical voice, she would have been with her mother in Cairo, no shadow of death brooding there. With Rex—the old happy trio.

The thought of her brother—his mother's darling—so far from home, in cruel suspense, strengthened her in her resolve. Sandy had deserved his fate. But, oh, how unjust it was! What had she done to be punished like this? Anger flamed into her eyes. For sorrow more often embitters the young than "softens" them—that popular fancy. It needs the experience of years to deaden the first shock of revolt and a

deeper philosophy than is bred by a happy, sheltered childhood. Even "Father" had turned against her, withholding the comfort on which she had counted. The whole world conspired to hurt her.

So now, as the bell rang again from the telephone in the long room—where she played at the hollow farce of dining—and she guessed whose voice would greet her ears, she rose slowly, nerving herself to a definite encounter.

With an effort, she unhooked the receiver.

"Yes? Who is it?" She steadied her voice.

Back came the well-known accents, full of eager anxiety:

"I'm Sandy. Is that you, Sheila? I'm at the station with your luggage. May I bring it now? How's your mother?"

"*Worse.*" The word was a challenge. "You can't come here——"

He broke in:

"I must. You can surely spare me a minute? I'm so frightfully sorry. For—*everything.*" The pause in the speech was eloquent.

She did not answer. He started again.

"If I'd only known, I'd have come with you. I caught the first train there was. It's a cruel business about your mother. I can guess how anxious you must be. Of course I won't bring your luggage now. I'll leave it in the cloak-room and send it round first thing to-morrow. But I mean to see you myself to-night. I *must* explain. I'm desperate!"

If only his voice were not so dear! The girl fought against its charm and the love in it that her soul craved, conjuring up that other Sandy, no longer tender and considerate.

"I won't see you. It's no good. You know why." She caught her breath. "I returned your ring—it's all over. I thought you'd understand by that. The least thing you can do now is to stay away—when I'm in such trouble." She gripped the receiver so tightly that a stab of cramp shot up her arm. In some strange way she welcomed it. It was nothing to the pain in her heart.

"Sheila! You don't *mean* it?" Sandy's voice sounded hollow.

"I do."

A silence. Then:

"You *can't*. I won't believe it. It's too—brutal! You know I love you with all my heart. I didn't mean—I lost my head—oh, I can't explain on this damned phone! If only you'd see me for five minutes? It isn't sporting to turn me down without giving me a chance."

Clever Sandy! It hit the mark. She hesitated, torn asunder between her love of fair play and a dread of her own rising weakness—half child, half woman.

A memory returned to her and she clutched at it. A last test of that "dependence" which had struck her as a vital factor in character.

"Did you know that the telegraph wires were down yesterday when you met me?"

"No." Her heart gave a leap. She could hear the surprise in his reply, for he could not understand the reason for the unexpected question. But he went on honestly, ignorant of her purpose, "I heard it later. Mavis told me. It was no use worrying you at that hour. I guessed that your father would understand the cause and write to you that night." A pause. "You mustn't blame me for that. You don't, do you?" He sounded relieved. It was such a trifle to stand between them in comparison with what had followed. "Of course I'm sorry, as things turned out. Still, you got off by the express. It was only a few hours at the most. My one idea was that you should have a good night's rest first."

The moment the words had passed his lips he realized his supreme blunder. For the scornful young voice caught him up.

"A good night's rest?" All the bitterness of her wounded pride rang in the speech.

"Sheila—— Good God!" He was incoherent. "I can't stand this—I'm coming round."

"It's no use. I won't see you." In her panic she hunted

for the weapon that could hurt him most and, by instinct, found it. "I shall tell the servants not to admit you."

She heard him give an odd sound as though he were choking. She waited, tense, biting her lip to keep back the words prompted by her treacherous heart, which rebelled against her reason's judgment. But when he answered, his voice was quiet. Too quiet. Sheila shivered, her nerves strained to breaking-point.

"There's no need to do that. I'll wait—until your mother's better. Is there anything I can do for her?"

"Nothing—now."

"What do you mean?"

His victory over his temper, the steady purpose in his words, had had the effect of rousing in her an hysterical impulse. She struck blindly.

"It's too late. She stayed in England for *our* sakes, this cruel winter. She's never done such a thing before, so, if she dies, we've killed her."

There followed the superstitious horror of a prophetic utterance. She felt she had foredoomed her mother. She broke down utterly.

"Oh, go away! It's all over. I shall never speak to you again." A sob rose, stifling her. "It's your fault! I can't trust you." Desperately, as he tried to answer, his voice still ringing in her ears, she hung up the receiver—an action more eloquent than words.

Then, with that odd absorption in trifles that seems to force itself on the mind in moments of physical exhaustion, she examined her hand, aware of pain.

A weal ran across the palm, red, with a white ridge beyond. She studied it with dazed eyes. It might have belonged to another person. But a tear splashed down upon her wrist. With this evidence of her suffering, feeling returned.

"Oh, Sandy, Sandy!" The cry broke from her tortured heart.

In wounding him she had hurt herself, beyond the limits of endurance. The tears, released, streamed down her

cheeks. She made for the door. She must reach her room, hide away in her despair. It blotted out the thought of her mother.

But on the threshold she paused, startled. The doctor was handing his overcoat to Martha in the dim hall. He turned, glanced keenly at the girl, and came forward, hand outstretched.

"Come in here." His voice was gentle and very deliberate. "I'm glad to see you." It was an unconventional greeting, but he had known her since her childhood. "That's better." He closed the door and drew a chair out for her. "Sit down. I can spare you a minute. I shall want your help by and by."

She looked at him wonderingly out of wide, tear-stained eyes. A sudden sense of annoyance seized her; of being foiled by every one.

"I *can't* help! They don't want me. I'm no good to anybody."

He nodded his head.

"I understand." He poured her out a glass of wine. "Drink this. You're overtired. You've had a long and trying journey."

She obeyed him mutely, struggling against a fresh onslaught of tears. Her hand shook, and the last drops of wine trickled down her chin. She wiped them off defiantly. He watched her with grave, kindly eyes.

"I meant what I said just now. I know that I can count on you. You're not hysterical, thank heaven."

The word that holds a covert insult to most of her sex took effect.

"No." She drew herself erect. "What can I do?"

"A good deal. But it's not easy." He smiled at her approvingly.

Colour came flickering into her cheeks. For the moment she forgot Sandy. She looked very like her father now, with the same slightly aggressive air of challenging adverse opinion.

"Well?" It was the old Sheila, of childish days, abrupt and boyish.

"You must lie low and keep your temper." He smiled the harshness out of the words. "I know just what you're going through. Your mother must have every chance, and I'm rather anxious about your father. He won't sleep and he won't eat. You've got to use your influence and work upon his common sense. You mustn't expect him to be grateful. He'll treat you like a tiresome child. As you say, he doesn't want you at present. His one idea is your mother. But he'll remember — afterwards. He's devoted to you. You know that?"

She nodded.

"Well, you've to be his nurse—unobtrusively. Make him eat and rest, or he'll break down. That's the task I'm setting you."

"I'll try." She brushed back a lock that had fallen forward over her eyes and secured it impatiently with a comb.

The doctor bent forward, frowning slightly.

"What have you done to your wrist?"

Instinctively she covered it, drawing down her ruffled sleeve.

"It's nothing. Just a scratch." Then she seemed to change her mind. She held out the arm with its angry scar. "I did it in trying to close a window. On the latch. The wind was high." She was testing her strength. With the result came an intimate thrill of triumph. Yes. She could live without Sandy.

"Well, it's pretty deep. Bathe it well and keep some boracic lint round it. I must go now—here's your father." He lowered his voice. "But I count on you."

Dependence again! Her eyes kindled. She was being proved. She did not guess that in his wisdom her old friend was giving her the relief of work, to tide over the days of waiting, as much for her sake as for her parent's.

Mr. Travers entered the room impatiently and hailed the doctor.

"I thought I heard you." He frowned at Sheila, detaining

the busy man, and then, distastefully, at the table. "If you've finished you'd better have this cleared."

"Yes, dad." Her voice was gentle.

She watched the pair go upstairs, then stood for a moment collecting her thoughts.

Sandy was gone, but there was Father—who had never failed her, until this crisis. And how could she blame him now? She felt convicted of selfishness, immersed in her own private grief, forgetful of her family. There was Rex too. If anything happened—she faced the thought, setting her teeth—they would need all her sympathy and help in the dark future.

Life was not over for her. There was work to be done—difficult work. She turned round, retraced her steps, and rang the bell, her brain busy.

"I'll tell Martha to keep the soup and coax Father to have some later." She caught sight of herself in the glass, her tear-stained cheeks and swollen eyelids. She gazed back indifferently. "I don't care if she does see it."

This was a new departure. In earlier days she had been ashamed of any public display of weakness. Now, with her wider outlook, face to face with the facts of life and the close mystery of death, she was stirred to the depths by a new experience: the birth of the maternal instinct. For it is not towards children alone that a woman has this awakening; more often towards grown men. Never in her love for Sandy, so sure of himself, so light-hearted, had she felt this strange imperious call for all her comfort and protection. It brought with it a renewal of Faith: a place and purpose for her in the scheme of a world that had become a desert, arid through a gust of passion.

. . . . . .

Nevertheless, when the blow fell, it stunned Sheila. It was her first close acquaintanceship with death.

Later, as Time brought in its wake the merciful healing touch of habit, she drew comfort from the fact of her mother's peaceful passing. For the manner of it was true to the code

set up by the dead woman in life. There was no painful farewell scene. Tranquil and dignified, her spirit slipped from its frail tenure, leaving the beautiful body still, with a calm, sweet smile on the gentle lips as the tired heart ceased beating.

Her husband's grief was a tragedy to all who understood the man. He held himself in an icy restraint, silent, tearless, eternally brooding. Even Sheila, loving him, shrank from his presence that first day, while in a cold, detached voice he gave the necessary orders.

She turned for advice to her friend the doctor and poured out her misgivings. He counselled patience—that hardest of tests to the young and energetic. For she wanted to be so much to her father. Here was the great opportunity, yet she found no words to bridge the gulf.

"He'd be better, of course, if he'd break down." The doctor nodded his head gravely. "He's a strong man and he takes it hard. You mustn't lose heart. It will come all right. When everything's settled, do your best to get him away to fresh scenes. He oughtn't to stay, brooding here."

Torn by her own grief, she hovered, wistful, in the background, longing for some kindly glance from the keen, dark eyes, now so blank. Once, summoning all her courage, she slipped her arms round her father's neck.

"*Poor* daddy!"

He shrank away with a quick:

"There—there! You're a good child." An effort that held no need of her. Then, he turned again to his work; those material details that seem to be such a useless mockery at such moments, filled with death's finality.

He spoke to her once about her mourning.

"Get what you want. Send the bills to me."

She caught at the chance of conversation.

"And Rex? What about Rex?" she asked.

"He knows by now." His voice was hard.

She sat down to write to her brother and poured out her full heart on paper. The letter was blotted by her tears.

Never before in her life had she known how much she loved her mother.

Not a single word of Sandy. It mystified and worried Sheila. Her father seemed to have forgotten the fact of the man's existence.

Sandy had written, more than once. She dared not read the bulky letters. They went, intact, into the fire. She could trust him not to call at the house. No man of his birth and social tact could intrude on her at such a time. Yet her father must be told in the end. This new father, so strange and cold. How would he take the news?

It came at last, the dreaded moment, in the natural way that such affairs, long debated, so often do, upsetting human calculations. She had ventured into his study late on the evening after her mother's death.

"I've come to say good night, dad." She stood there, a pathetic figure, in the hurriedly-finished black frock that made her seem slimmer and emphasized the pallor of her young face. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes." He looked up from a list, carefully marked, of intimate friends to be told of the date of the funeral. "Have you let Sandy know—about the time?"

She shook her head. He nodded gravely.

"I'd better write to him myself. Has he been here to see you to-day?" There was something puzzling in his glance.

She did not answer for a moment. She was summoning all her strength to tell him.

To her surprise he held out his hand, an invitation to come closer.

"What's wrong between you and Sandy?"

She gave a gasp. So he had known! Her fingers stole into his. He felt them clutch convulsively.

"I'm not—going—to marry him." It came out in little jerks. He looked at her curiously. "I want to stay at home with you. If you'd like it?" Her face was wistful.

"My dear child!" He seemed to awake. He swung round the revolving chair and drew her down upon his knee.

"I certainly shan't agree to that. We shall have to postpone the marriage, perhaps. But only for a short time. I can't allow you, for a moment, to contemplate such a sacrifice. Apart from your own feelings, it isn't fair upon the man. I appreciate your intention"—he moistened his lips that were cracked and dry—"more than I can say, my dear. But I shall get along all right. I've lived my life; yours lies before you. I want, at least, to see you happy. And I know how much you love Sandy."

"You don't." How difficult it was! "I mean—it's over. It's not because of you—not now. Though it might have been, had I known. I broke it off at Cropley Manor. Long before——" She paused, stifled. She could not yet speak of her mother's death.

"Why?" He stared at her in amazement. He had imagined some lover's tiff, but not this, a definite rupture. Anger stole into his eyes. "What has Sandy done?" His voice was fierce.

But the quick question showed the girl his unalterable belief in her. He threw all blame on the man. She felt a sudden thrill of pride.

"I did it myself—of my own free will. Oh, daddy!" Her head went down on his breast. "Don't ask me why! I can't tell you. You must *trust* me. . . . It's not my fault."

The misery in the young voice thawed the ice in his heart.

"*Damn* him!" He caught her to him closely. "My poor lass—my pretty lass!"

The old familiar tender term of his boyhood days in the North was wrung from the depths of his being. His dry lips sought hers. He rocked her as if she had been a child.

"Hush, hush! He isn't worth it. He never was good enough for you. I mistrusted him from the start. Don't you go fretting now." For she was sobbing helplessly in the relief of unlooked-for comfort. "You've got your old father still—though your mother's gone. And she didn't know.

I'm glad of that." His voice broke. "You're all I've left in the world now."

They clung together, reunited; intensely human, feeling the need of the close touch of cheek on cheek, their tears mingling, their sorrows one.

"I thought I was going to lose my lass." She caught the old loving accents through the ruffled masses of her hair. "I'm selfish enough to be glad. Though I don't like the way of it. No, I'm not going to question you. If you're sure there'll be no looking back, and you've made up your mind, then it's settled. I've been very anxious at times myself. He wasn't steady enough for my taste." He felt her quiver in his arms and his face darkened. He bent lower, a shade of fear in his eyes. "There's one thing I *must* ask." But he paused, at a loss for words. She was such a child, this daughter of his. He searched in vain for a subterfuge. Then his honesty prevailed and he flung aside his pretences. "He hasn't done you any wrong?"

Her voice came up to him, shamed but true:

"No. Only—I don't trust him." She caught his stifled "Thank God!"

"Then you're quite right not to marry him." He stared out over the bowed head, remembering the long years of perfect belief in his wife. His thoughts came back to their child. "It's been a bad time for you. This—and your dear mother—— If I'd known——" He was reproaching himself, feeling his new responsibility.

She stirred in his arms, aware of this, loyally eager to defend him, and stole a glance at the well-known features that looked so worn. Her love broke forth.

"You're a dear and a comfort! I'll *never* leave you." She hugged him, her lips, salt with her tears, pressed against his lined face that pricked her where his hasty shave had left the strong, resistant hairs.

"Well, we'll see about that." He smiled faintly, stroking her head with his square-tipped fingers. "Meanwhile is there anything that I can do to help you now?"

"No." Then she withdrew the word. A memory returned to her. "Yes, there's one thing." She straightened herself, a little pucker between her brows.

"Well?" He watched her. "Out with it!"

"Will you take me away—right away?" She grasped the opportunity. "I can't bear London now. I don't want—to meet Sandy."

It was bravely said: a half-truth, born of the doctor's warning.

She saw the struggle in his face. Like many another stricken man, he clung to the home he had shared with his wife and the lingering fragrance of her presence.

"Where?" He spoke with an effort.

She sought swiftly for inspiration. It came, with a throb of self-reproach.

"To Rex. It's better for him than returning here—too late! And he's all alone. It must be dreadful for him out there. Oh, couldn't we go? Just for a little? I know he's feeling broken-hearted."

"You're right." He squared his bent shoulders. "I blame myself for forgetting the boy. In a sense—that is. But you understand. Your mother always came first with me."

A silence, sympathetic, followed. Then the girl broke it, shyly:

"I think she'd wish us to go herself." She spoke in an awed whisper with the curious consciousness of a presence, unseen but loving, by their side. "She'd be glad. She was so fond of Rex."

A fortnight later they sailed for Cairo.

PART III

CO-PARTNERSHIP

CHAPTER XI

MRS. FROST was one of those women who love to linger over farewells.

Now, as she stood in the narrow passage that did duty for a hall in the old North Audley Street house, she arranged her veil for the second time in the mirror over the flattened table that held an overflowing card-tray, and prattled on, undisturbed.

"I've fallen in love with your pretty house—or do you call it a maisonnette? I'm envious, with no home of my own. So tired of living in my boxes! But since my dear husband's death"—a sigh—"things have been difficult. Though I've just a few old friends left who take pity on me when I'm *too* lonely and put me up for a few days."

Sheila nodded, avoiding the hint. She had been victimized already. The lunch had eventuated from a chance meeting with Mrs. Frost wandering round the *Times* Book Club. The widow had walked home with her, reviving old memories, for it was long since they had met, and had jumped at the invitation, carelessly worded, on the doorstep.

"London's very empty now," Sheila was fingering the latch. "You say you don't want a hansom?"

"No. I go by the humble bus." Mrs. Frost glanced at the clock. She was marking time to enable her to reach a concert at Queen's Hall at the hour appointed by a friend in possession of complimentary tickets. "I suppose it's no use asking you to come and see me before I leave? You're such a busy little lady, with your social and political work. And Hampstead's such a long way off. I'm sorry not to meet your husband. I hear he's quite the coming man. It seems

strange to see little Sheila the wife of a Member of Parliament." The clock struck and she held out her hand. "I must fly! I've so enjoyed my lunch, and I'm glad to see you looking so well. And *so* happy!"

At last she was off.

Sheila, in the narrow doorway, paused to watch the departing guest, stout and imposing, carefully-dressed, sail past the grey old church to the distant haunt of omnibuses. The years had not dimmed her golden hair, for a very good reason, but they had added weight to the figure that Mrs. Frost still fondly hoped might pass for "rounded."

"*So* happy!" Her parting words were echoing in Sheila's ears as she closed the door and made her way up the narrow stairs dividing her from the ornate shop beyond, occupying the ground floor.

It was one of the few old stucco houses among the modern red-brick ones, and its frontage belied its size. For it straggled back in long, dim rooms to the space between the two streets, bordered by the vast mansions of Grosvenor Square on the right and affording a glimpse on the other side of the grey walls of the mortuary chapel that lies hidden behind St. Mark's.

Although it had been redecorated by Philip Antrobus on his marriage, it still retained its atmosphere of a bygone age and the haunting touch of a generation far removed from the days of electric light and motors.

This was sensed in the passages and the dark panelled dining-room; a sort of spiritual disapproval of modern progress, as though the walls, aloof and hostile, wrapped in tradition, were jealous of their ancient secrets. It was not a house that welcomed you. Sheila had felt this distinctly of late.

When she reached the first landing she passed into her husband's study and began a close survey of the place, mindful of the new housemaid. She expected Philip home that evening from a month spent at St. Andrews in the company of other golfers. Her own holiday had been passed with her father and Rex, fishing in Ireland. She had cut it short, by a

week, to return, find a new maid, and prepare for her husband, who was fidgety about his house, as men, for long years bachelors, so often become in middle age.

Beyond the study was his bedroom, with a bathroom leading out of it. Originally these had been reserved for visitors, but during the last six months Philip had moved downstairs. He liked to work late at night, after their many social engagements. Often detained at the House, the new arrangement suited him. He could let himself in quietly and go to bed without waking Sheila. She had accepted his reasons calmly. It was true to the co-partnership which had formed the basis of their marriage. Yet beneath her friendly attitude lurked a faint rancour, undefined, a feeling of bewilderment. Her vanity whispered, "This is neglect."

Mrs. Frost's speech persisted as she frowned down at the bathroom taps, not so bright as they might have been. *Was* she "happy"? For many months she had evaded this furtive question, immersed in her social duties and the whirl of the London season. Had life brought her in full the measure of happiness she craved? Could it begin and end in work? Congenial work. A sudden sense of misgiving seized her. For was it congenial? She felt uncertain.

Making a few mental notes for the housemaid's benefit, she escaped from the room that seemed like a part of Philip, with its neat precision and air of restraint, of entire absorption in himself. She felt she had no business there.

When she reached the next landing her spirits lightened perceptibly. Here she was in her own flat, with the drawing-room that looked on North Audley Street, and the little boudoir at the back, opening into her own bedroom—similar to the one beneath—which they had shared for the first two years of this amazing marriage. On the floor above were the kitchen and the servants' low-roofed quarters, with the tiny lift that formed the link between the cook and the tradesmen. But here Sheila was alone, not only mistress of all she surveyed, but secure from any interruption for most of the day, and all the night.

She opened the door of the drawing-room. How hot it felt, with the midday sun blazing in at the windows! Mrs. Frost had left a trace, stuffier still, of some heavy scent. After the happy days in Ireland of open-air life with her people, this return to town, at the end of September, brought a sense of being caged in the deserted, dusty city. Her London clothes weighed on her. She longed for the old careless freedom.

She stood for a moment, irresolute, her eyes wandering over the room and the familiar furniture. All hers! The thought smote her. For of late she had been pressed for money. Philip entertained freely. It was part of his plan of campaign. He had not married a rich wife without due consideration.

The old home of Sheila's girlhood had passed into other hands. Her father lived at Whitehall Court, which was handier for his business. Even the Gate House was gone. After one forlorn summer spent there by the pair, in which the weather itself had failed them, they had decided to let the place. It only emphasized their loss. When Sheila had married Antrobus, three years after her mother's death, her father had given her the choice of much of the surplus furniture. It had proved a very useful gift. For of one thing there was no doubt. Her husband's ambition ran side by side with a shrewd appreciation of money.

He had found Mr. Travers generous up to a certain point; but of late there had been a little friction, and Sheila felt the subtle discomfort of standing between the pair, her private means the point at issue. It was difficult to be loyal to both.

The thought recurred to her now as she summed up her possessions.

The chintzes were faded, through constant washing. She had promised herself new covers, and had set her heart on a design copied from an early French one, suitable to the satin-wood tables and cabinets which her mother had prized, some of them genuine *Vernis Martin*. The carpet, too, had begun to show marked signs of wear and tear, and the paper, with its small gold spot, was darkened by the London fogs.

"It all wants doing up." She frowned at the walls. "But

I can't afford it. Last season was ruinous! I shouldn't mind if Philip seemed——" She checked herself. The half-formed words upon her tongue had been "decently grateful." "We shall have to economize this winter. On one point I'm decided: I'm not going to let Father be worried. He's done enough, goodness knows!" She loosened her collar, which felt tight. "I think I'll get into something cool. Philip doesn't come till seven."

Her bedroom was sheltered from the sun. She drew a deep breath of relief as she slipped off her town clothes and stood for a moment before the window, bare-armed, feeling the air play round her neck and shoulders. They were white and shapely, glowing with health. She had grown, even since her marriage; not only in stature. Her mind had expanded, and this had given her a poise which had been lacking in her girlhood. Mr. Travers had noticed of late a surprising resemblance to his wife in the way his daughter carried herself, the little dark head with its glossy hair proudly erect on her slender neck.

She had been attractive as a child, but now she held a subtler charm. With her vivid colouring, clear skin, and the steady glance of her blue eyes, there was something repressed in her attitude, as though her radiant vitality was held in leash for some set purpose. It tempted curiosity. Yet she still kept men at a distance, friendly but disdaining flirtation. This made her popular with women, though few became intimate. Virtue may be "its own reward," but it tends towards isolation.

She slipped on a cool kimono and settled down in the boudoir by the open window, a book on her knee. But her mind refused to concentrate its attention on the printed pages. Mrs. Frost's closing speech seemed to have added the last touch to her slow, smouldering discontent. She stared out into space, formulating this secret grievance.

On the table beside her stood a portrait of a thin, dark woman, intensely alive, with a broad brow and clever eyes. It was Magda Hill, her closest friend. The face awoke

memories of their meeting in Cairo, some five years since, and the strange attraction Sheila had felt in the owner's personality. The name was on every one's lips now For Magda was recognized as a leader in the revolution against Tradition that had flamed forth in the movement to secure Woman's Suffrage.

Sheila, restless and unhappy after her broken engagement with Sandy, had welcomed a cause which seemed to protest against a monopoly of power in the hands of the opposite sex. Magda had worked skilfully to secure a youthful partisan both intelligent and endowed with means, exerting her charm to overcome Mr. Travers' prejudice.

In the end they effected a compromise. So long as Sheila held aloof from the militant section, he acquiesced in her taking a share in the crusade. He used the strongest argument he possessed against any public disturbance: the horror with which his dead wife would have viewed the proceeding. It could not fail to carry weight with his daughter in the days of mourning. Although she was sorely tempted at times, Sheila kept to their agreement.

But she threw herself, body and soul, into the new and absorbing work. Undoubtedly it had broadened her mind. Under Magda's influence she had learned to reason from cause to effect, swept from a purely personal outlook into a wide field of conjecture. She had found, too, that she possessed a certain, direct gift of language which fitted her for platform work. This brought a supreme joy. It helped her to forget Sandy, but not the cause of their rupture. Although she permitted friendships with men, she held aloof from sentiment. She was determined not to marry.

Yet, oddly enough, it was her work as a suffragette that brought her at length in touch with Philip Antrobus. In those days few public men took up the cudgels for her sex. But Antrobus had been a lawyer before standing for Parliament. A shrewd, intensely ambitious man, he saw in the new feminist movement more than a passing phase attributed to hysteria. It was an escape from the stagnation of political life at this

period. It promised large developments. He became an open partisan.

He was utterly indifferent to women. The fact in itself gave him power. For he kept his own judgment intact and in turn was attractive to the sex, as so many cold men are, with their hint of mystery.

To Sheila it gave him an added charm. He was the antithesis of Sandy. Very correct, always respectful, precise in his language, rarely moved to any definite opinion, but then shrewd and authoritative, he seemed a man whom she could trust. It gave her a sense of security.

When he began to single her out from her companions, to visit her at her father's house, and to hint at his admiration, it roused her woman's vanity, that had lain dormant through self-mistrust. The cause was a common factor. She was thrilled by his confidence. They talked for hours on the subject, and he coached her cleverly in her speeches.

So the curious courtship went on, devoid of love on either side, though of this the girl was not aware, nor that the man had but one impulse, his own personal ambition. He was hampered by his lack of money. He felt, too, the need of a wife to assist him in entertaining. Sheila could supply both. She was his junior by many years. He judged her to be pliable. He set himself deliberately to study the weak points in her armour.

He found that she mistrusted men. From outside sources he gleaned the story of her earlier engagement. He guessed more than she believed. He hit upon the happy notion of a marriage which should maintain as its object work for the common cause, a co-partnership of interests, with the closest tie that life allows, yet placing passion in the background. He presented the scheme skilfully. It filled Sheila with amazement, a curious, obscure gratitude, and a new belief in the power of her brains.

Here was a man who wanted her for her mental attractions —a dangerous lure. She asked for a month to think it over. He agreed with sufficient hesitation to imply that he would

suffer by it. He would miss her "help and inspiration." The "Egeria" touch added Romance. She felt she was necessary to him. He completed his conquest by going away, and he never wrote her a single letter.

She found that she missed him surprisingly. Her interest in her work declined. She confided at last in her father, who was frankly puzzled by the affair—too robust to approve of a marriage which seemed to him cold-blooded.

He doubted the underlying motive, but Sheila was sure that the man loved her. It was a finer love than Sandy's. It involved an equal right to labour, a mutual interest and respect. It safeguarded her independence. Antrobus had not been so foolish as to hint at a brother-and-sister affair. She knew that her marriage would conform to traditional conventions. But so many of her friends by now had passed down the same road and appeared contented and unchanged, so much had been said on the subject in the feminist circles which she affected, that the girl had slowly lost that horror which is a twin of ignorance.

She had tested the man in her girlish fashion.

During their long drives home together after the many late meetings, he had sat, rigid, by her side. He had never attempted the slightest form of familiarity. Only once, at their parting, had he gravely kissed her hand. She deemed him to be "superior to passion," and because she felt no love for him, but a great liking and respect, she highly approved his self-control. They would be "glorious companions."

He was well-groomed, with the keen face so common in the legal profession, fine grey eyes and tight lips, was rather pale and black-haired. She disliked his hands. Though well-shaped, with filbert nails, they were dry and hard, essentially unsympathetic. But his manner was perfect. He held himself with assurance in society, although by birth he could not lay claim to any distinction. His father had been a schoolmaster. To him he owed his education. Of his mother he rarely spoke. Both had been dead for many years.

Mr. Travers made inquiries. He discovered nothing against

the man. He seemed to have a career before him and was undoubtedly a worker. Ambitious, steady, temperate, welcomed in society, possessed of a small sure income, the result of his legal savings, with good health: this summed him up. The father could find no justification for his instinctive dislike to the match. He was moved, too, by the wish to see his daughter happily settled. He did not want her to be absorbed entirely in her Suffrage work, nor to become an old maid. It hurt his paternal pride. He had watched her snub other men who admired her. He believed that a home of her own, with children, was the sphere for which she was fitted. He thought she wanted humanizing.

Rex, too, approved the suitor. He was working then in the North of Scotland, and was deep in his first love affair with the daughter of a neighbouring squire. He decided it would be "rather nice" to have a sister taking a part in the busy political world—nothing to hurt his prospects there! For the lady he loved was conservative, a trifle scornful of business men, though privately attracted to Rex, and not unmindful of his prospects. It was "quite time that Sheila married." That was his candid verdict. All "this Suffrage nonsense, now"! She'd be breaking windows one of these days. Rosamund would be horrified.

Magda highly approved the notion. She glowed over the partnership and called it a "true marriage." Sheila listened to all in turn. Life was certainly blank without him. What she failed to realize was that it was blank for lack of love. Nature was working secretly. But Antrobus was the wrong man.

His return to her was happily timed. She had had a touch of influenza and was feeling depressed and extremely bored. He rang her up on the telephone.

"I hear you've been ill. May I come and see you? I know the month is not quite up. But I'm worried about you. I won't stay long. Do you feel well enough for a caller?"

She jumped at the chance of breaking through the monotony of her seclusion.

"If you aren't afraid of catching 'Flu'?" She laughed, and heard him echo it.

"I'll risk that."

When he entered the room, with flowers for her and a book she craved, slightly browned by his country visit, the fine grey eyes unusually eager, she felt a sudden thrill of excitement. It swept away the last of her doubts.

"Well?" He held her hands in his.

She nodded her head. He kissed her gravely.

It was typical of the man that his first action on leaving her was to call at a chemist's for a dose of ammoniated quinine. His courage was always tempered by prudence. Luck held no part in his scheme of success.

So he evaded influenza and married Sheila within three months.

. . . . . .

Sitting there in the quiet room Sheila was unravelling the grey threads woven into the fabric of her married life. The colour was not at all to her taste; this neutral shade, untrue to youth.

Happiness was a wide term. Where did it begin and end? Why was she feeling so ill-used? She admitted frankly that something was wrong, yet she could not place a finger on it. For the fault, if it lay on Philip's side, was a negative one, some factor missing in their daily intercourse. She could not pin it to an action. Though undemonstrative, he was courteous. They never quarrelled openly. Yet his silences held a menace. It was like being sent to Coventry. His avoidance of her hurt her pride, but he had an excellent excuse. Work—the motive of their marriage.

Her mind moved round this in a circle. Where did all this labour lead? At last she saw a ray of light. Back to himself, to his own success. It held no touch of altruism. She might share in it by being his wife, but the aim was to satisfy his ambition. It was the same with everything. This cause on which she had set her heart, the Vote for Women, was only a peg on which he could hang his clever speeches. His

increasing hospitality, at the expense of his wife, was from no real sense of friendship. He entertained "useful" people, rungs in the ladder of success. Even from the first hour of their honeymoon he had looked ahead with this sole object, choosing a trip to Montenegro not because Sheila liked the adventure, but since the Balkans had loomed up on the political horizon. It might be useful one day to say he had visited the country. The fact had slipped out later and had somewhat amused Sheila, immersed in their undertaking—this wonderful co-partnership. But now she did not smile at it. It seemed to accentuate the fact of the lesser part she played in his life.

Montenegro? Her mind swung back to the long days, spent on horseback over that wild and mountainous country, that ended in some squalid inn, which lacked all comfort and, after the first strange and picturesque attraction, was repulsive with its disorder and dirt. It was not an ideal land for lovers, but Sheila had welcomed the experience, secretly glad of the excuse it afforded for evading intimate situations. It put her on her mettle too. Only once had her courage failed her; the result, a double disillusion. She caught at this as the first grey thread.

Awakening one dark night in an unlit and dirty room, she had been aware of creepy noises, had hunted for matches in hot haste to be met with a most unpleasant sight. For the discoloured, greasy walls were alive with cockroaches; a living pattern that moved in a maze and trailed across the stone floor.

She had roused her husband hurriedly, but Philip had refused to stir. Cool and philosophical, he had pointed out that the creatures were harmless, that there was nothing to be done. He had been unmoved by her distress, had turned over and fallen asleep. Angry with him and with herself, she had watched the candle gutter down, the sheet drawn tightly under her chin, a prey to intolerable disgust.

She had studied the sleeping face beside her. For the first time she had realized the age of the man whom she had

married; the criss-cross lines beneath his eyes, the thinning hair upon his temples, and the tight, slightly cruel, lips, colourless and ascetic. Sandy would not have lain there peacefully sleeping whilst she suffered. The thought had struck her forcibly. He would have devised some active assault upon the invaders to soothe her nerves. Her youth resented the inertion of this middle-aged, deliberate man; above all, his selfishness.

Now, reviving this memory, she started. The truth poured in on her. There could be no companionship with a nature so purely egotistic. He was sufficient to himself. Then why had he taken a wife? Was it—*could* it be for her money? She was there to finance him in his schemes!

She tried to thrust the thought away. He cared for her. He had always said so. No other woman had ever moved him. And suddenly she realized that this was abnormal. At his age he should have had some passing fancy of youthful days to memorize. Because his nature was utterly cold, without the faintest touch of passion, Sheila had no hold on him. In choosing Sandy's antithesis she had thrown away the most powerful weapon that a woman can use in extremity. This was Nature's punishment for a marriage that ignored love.

She got up restlessly and began to pace the narrow room. How would it end? What lay before her? Would they drift still further asunder, her money the only remaining link? Already the frail tie of "work" was wearing thin, for Antrobus had no need of an "Egeria."

Over the high mantelpiece was a water-colour bought by her at a charity bazaar. It caught her attention as she passed, like the nod of an old friend, for it was dear and familiar.

The scene of its purchase rose up before her, and she welcomed it, glad to escape for a moment from her relentless logic. The crowded stalls with their finery and, before one, a small boy in an Eton suit, with a well-scrubbed face that wore a harassed expression. She could hear again his high-pitched voice as he checked her, holding out some tickets:

"I say, won't you buy one? They're for a raffle. There's a

picture, and a flower pot, and a big cushion—three prizes. You're sure to get one! Only five shillings! They're awfully jolly." Then, emboldened by her smile, "You wouldn't like the bally lot? It's the last day, and the mater says I've *got* to sell them. There's five left. The cushion's a ripper—pink and blue." A chuckle, as Sheila laughed at him. "Aunt Maria worked it herself. She'll be awfully riled if it doesn't go. I say, you *are* a brick!" For Sheila was hunting in her purse. He had solemnly taken her address. "The raffle's goin' to be drawn at six. Which do you like best?"

"Oh, the picture." She had not seen it, but the cushion sounded too terrible.

"Righto!" He was gone, joyous, rattling the loose silver.

She had forgotten the incident. The bazaar had been part of her day's work, mapped out for her by Philip. Some "useful" people had held stalls.

To her surprise, next afternoon, she had found a parcel in the hall directed in a sprawling hand. Unwrapping the crumpled paper, tied with knotted pieces of string, she had discovered a framed picture, destined to haunt her throughout life. For it caught her vivid imagination as a sketch will, with no reason that the brain can find, an appeal to the soul, some subconscious affinity.

It was a landscape, dashed in by a sure hand with high lights, rather rugged and unfinished yet suggesting a mystery, that eternal question elbowing life: "Whither? To what end?"

She had christened it, then and there, "The Empty Road"; for this was the subject. It ran across the open downs under a stormy, lowering sky with a glint of sunshine that escaped through a rift in the heavy clouds. Where the road mounted the slope and met at last the vault of the heavens, it caught the ray and shone chalk-white, to vanish as though cut by a knife.

The scene was as bare and denuded of life as a desert, and it had the strength and the cruelty of untamed Nature. It seemed to throw a gauntlet down to man, and call to the

pioneer: "Tread me at your peril! I am Life. I lead nowhere. At least to your finite minds. But beyond the hills lies the promise."

This was Sheila's interpretation. The Road drew her wherever she sat in the room that slowly faded away as her eyes dwelt upon the picture. It had an hypnotic quality. Even now it arrested her. She stood before it, frowning a little. It seemed typical of her fate.

She had set forth, such a joyous pilgrim, on this amazing pathway of life, filled with the high hopes of youth, so confident of the future, with a sunny faith in humanity. But one by one the landmarks had vanished. Hurt and surprised, she had stumbled on, drawing her courage desperately from the hope of some fair land of promise which lay "just over the hill." Would she never reach the summit? Supposing the whole thing were a hoax, a cruel jest: that, beyond the brow, the road went down, lonelier still, into the valley of age and death? She shivered at the morbid fancy.

"I *won't* believe it." She drew in her breath. "Something will happen. There's the sunshine." She followed the glittering ray of light. "It can't be always an empty road."

A thought flashed through her mind. Perhaps a child might come to meet her, with tiny, eager arms outstretched in the far-off golden future. If Philip—ah, there was the doubt! Philip did not care for children. It would interrupt his careful plans, disarrange his tidy house. Paternity had no charm for him. He was middle-aged, body and soul. Work—and what a barren thing was work for no object but oneself! Sheila, impatient, turned away.

"I believe what we want is a long Sabbath. I'm sick of seven days in the week. All the social wear and tear; and even then I can't choose my friends. I think I'll have the housemaid up and give her a lecture about those taps!" The anti-climax steadied her. She laughed, but the sound lacked heartiness. "I'm imagining. It's because I'm tired and London's so hot. I miss the country. I wish Magda

were in town. She always seems to understand. She would point out that nothing mattered unless it affected the community; that I'm a dot in the universe—I'm not sure that it's comforting!—and that Philip is another dot. He wouldn't like that—poor old Philip!" Her eyes twinkled at the thought of his injured dignity.

But the words marked her final decision. Never before had she used the term that holds contempt beneath its pity in connection with her husband. He was just that: "Poor old Philip!" And she had to make the best of him. His power over her was gone. She could be a tolerant spectator, aware of the motive of his life, but the glamour of their "work" had fled. Still, she would do her duty.

She rang the bell for the new housemaid. Her first lecture. How would she take it?

She took it somewhat sullenly, with one tense moment when it seemed that she was about to give notice, but Sheila quietly forestalled her.

"You'll have to do your work better, *if* you stay." The obvious doubt coming from the wrong quarter checked the girl in her intention.

"Yes, madam. I'll see to the taps. They were very bad when I came."

Sheila wisely ignored the excuse.

"Very well. Tell Horton to bring tea in here. Mr. Antrobus comes at six. You must be ready for his luggage. He prefers to unpack himself, so you'll be free after that." She smiled suddenly at the culprit. "It's your evening out, isn't it?"

Her smile was very like her mother's. It lit up her eyes as well as her lips. The swift change from severity to a covert understanding worked wonders. The maid unbent.

"Yes, madam. Thank you, madam. I'm sorry the taps——" Just in time she remembered her dignity and added, "It's hard to keep them clean in town. It's so *different* to the country."

With this complaint she beat a retreat, fully aware that

for four years she had pined for a "London place." Once there she thought it wise to dwell on past rural joys, which had included four long miles to be trudged through lonely, muddied roads in order to catch a glimpse of a shop.

Sheila still smiled as the door closed. She was a capable manager. She had passed her apprenticeship as mistress in her father's house.

"For two pins she would have gone! And they are so difficult to find. The only system of employment that has no variable time limit is that of marriage. It doesn't include a rise of wages, unluckily! But what a relief it must be to give notice when one's cross. I wonder how Philip would take it? 'This day month.'" She could laugh now. "He'd probably double my evenings out; he loves his own company. Or set me to dust the picture rails—anything hopelessly out of reach! I believe that his idea of heaven is a place where there are no smuts and all the pictures hang straight. I wish I had a 'tidy mind' and could share in his enthusiasm when he runs his fingers along his bookshelf and examines them eagerly for dust. It's as good as a day with the hounds to him. Oh, how I should love a ride! Somewhere in the green country."

Denied this, she took a bath and lingered in the cooling water. Then deliberately she chose an evening gown that Philip approved. She was going to make the best of things. She avoided the picture as she passed through the boudoir and went downstairs to glance at the dinner-table. She had taken pains with the menu, choosing her husband's favourite dishes, and the knowledge of this evoked in her a faint excitement. It should be a welcome—a real cheerful welcome home—the start of a new understanding. She added a touch to the flowers.

A hansom jingled up the road and stopped. She heard the front door open, and rang for the maid to see to the luggage. She did not go down to meet Philip herself but leaned over the banisters. She knew he disliked any fuss.

"Is that you?" she called gaily.

"Yes." He glanced up at her. Then his eyes went back to his letters, lying on the hall table. "One minute." He turned them over, opened the topmost and skimmed it through, refolded it carefully and placed it in an inside pocket. With the rest in his hand, he mounted the stairs, his face absorbed. "How are you?" Raising his hat, he touched her cheek with his lips, his hard, dry hand in hers. Even on that hot evening it was cold and lifeless, unsympathetic. He straightened himself, with a glance about him. It had something vaguely suspicious in it. He seemed to be searching for defects.

"I'm very well," she answered smoothly. "You're looking brown."

"It was hot on the links. You got my letter?"

She nodded her head.

"Wasn't it a fortunate thing my meeting Sir Frederick like that? We had a round of golf on Thursday. He beat me. Just as well! I'll tell you all about it later. I'll go now and have a wash. The *dust* in the train!" He flicked his cuff distastefully. "I was near the engine."

"I expect you're tired?"

"I am, a little. Is dinner at eight?"

"Yes. As usual."

"Good. I've time to answer a letter—an important letter—that's just reached me."

He seemed to awake to a sense of politeness.

"How are you?"

She controlled a smile.

"I'm very well."

The parrot-like repetition satisfied him.

"That's right. I'll see you later." He moved stiffly across the landing, feeling in his breast pocket for the precious communication. As he reached the door of his room he paused for a moment and carefully straightened a picture on the wall. "I suppose it's the draught from the front door." His voice held a trace of displeasure. "If you'll remind me, after dinner, I'll put a tack on either side."

"I'll try and remember." She checked a smile.

"Thanks." He turned on the threshold. "Oh, by the way, I shan't dress, if you'll excuse it? It's not worth while unpacking anything. I'm going away for the week-end. Sir Frederick has asked me down to Milestones. Most opportune, at this moment. He's the very man I wanted to know. Railes will be there and Martin Strood. I didn't mention it in my letter, as I felt sure you'd understand when I explained the reason. I may go on for a couple of nights to the former. He lives in the neighbourhood. It concerns an important matter, and I've promised to give them my support. They'll be useful men in the future. That's partly why I chose St. Andrews."

"I see." She watched the door close.

Conscious of the servant's presence, she forced a smile, but her eyes were angry. She went back to the dining-room and stared down at the pretty table with its bright silver and bowl of flowers.

"To come back from Ireland for *this*! Philip knew—it was prearranged. And I cut short my holiday."

She caught a glimpse of herself in the glass as she raised her head. Defiantly she studied her personal appearance: the air of youth that clung to her, the clear skin and Irish eyes. Why couldn't he be proud of his wife? There was no vanity in the question, only a slow resentment, a sense of waste and perplexity.

How hot it was! She turned on an electric fan near the window. The steady whir reminded her of the throb of a motor-launch. It would be lovely on the river. A memory of the Cleeve woods with the russet hue of early autumn, and the cool, oily green of the water rose temptingly in her mind.

She would go away. Why should she stay, alone, in the deserted town, simply to keep his house in order? Her face brightened at the thought; a touch of mischief curved her lips. She began to plan.

. . . . . .

Punctually, as the gong sounded, her husband emerged from his study.

They sat down to dinner in silence. She watched him examine the little slate in its silver frame that held the menu, but he made no comment on the fare. It was obvious that his thoughts wandered.

"Have you written your letter?"

"Yes, my dear." He seemed to awake to the fact of her presence. "I'm afraid I'm a little absent-minded. I've a good deal to think about. Did you enjoy your visit to Ireland?"

"Very much. The weather was lovely. I was heartily sorry to come away."

"Your father well?"

"He's looking splendid."

"I'm glad to hear it." A little pause. "Did he tell you that he'd heard from me?"

"No." Her mouth closed tightly.

Philip gave her a shrewd glance, but he did not pursue the topic.

"And Rex?" His voice was genial.

"He's just the same." Her face softened. She was devoted to her brother. "Full of life and high spirits. We had a lovely time together. He's very interested now in a new invention. It's his own. He firmly believes it will make his fortune."

Philip smiled, the thin lips slightly satirical.

"It rarely comes to the inventor. Other men may profit by it."

"Father is thinking of taking it up as soon as the patents are secured." She spoke rather defiantly.

"Ah, then it stands a better chance." He added in his suavest manner, "I sincerely hope so, for all concerned."

Another silence divided them. It weighed oppressively on Sheila. His deliberate actions fretted her nerves; the way he examined all the dishes and chose the portion he preferred, his carefully measured allowance of spirit and his sharp scrutiny of the glass, as though he detected an atom of fluff on the shining crystal surface. She felt again the odd fancy

that behind the dim, panelled walls mocking eyes were watching her; gay and reckless cavaliers, dainty ladies with painted cheeks and clipped bosoms, barely veiled, scornful of a generation so primly virtuous and so bored.

Philip raised his head at last from close attention to a pear which he had slowly peeled, dipping his fingers fastidiously in the shallow finger-bowl.

"I don't think they're quite ripe."

"No? Will you try these grapes?" As he demurred she went on, "What time do you go to-morrow?"

"By the five nine. It's an express. I shall get down in time for dinner."

"My train goes at three." She watched him maliciously under her lashes.

"Yours?" He looked taken aback.

"Yes." A dimple escaped her control.

"A week-end visit?" he suggested.

"Not to friends. I find London unbearable in this heat. I'm going on the river. To the *Lamb* at Wallingford."

"To an hotel?"

She guessed his thought: what an unnecessary expense!

"It's an inn." She laughed. "I don't quite know how long I shall stay there. It depends a good deal on the weather."

He stared at her.

"Are you going alone?"

"My dear Philip, what a question! Did you think it an elopement?"

He smiled at the jest. It was evident that he felt serenely sure of her.

"No, but it sounds somewhat dull."

"I shall take plenty of books with me and live on the river. I love the life. I've never stayed there before, but I hear it's a comfortable place, with a good host and excellent food. There's a capital punting reach, and it's so pretty. I know that part. We often went up there from Goring."

"Well, it will be an experience. You did not mention it in your letters."

She guessed that he disliked the plan.

"No, I thought it so much simpler to explain the matter when we met." This, in face of his similar conduct with regard to herself, was unanswerable. She went on, her face demure, "That's what I like about our marriage. We're both so thoroughly independent. I've just had my quarterly allowance and I'm *tempted*"—she laughed lightly—"to hire a little motor-boat for the days when I feel lazy. Don't you think it a good idea?"

He temporized.

"Is it safe? I don't quite like the project."

She rose from the table, the dinner ended.

"That's what I want to find out! I'm in the mood for an adventure." Her eyes were daring, she laid a hand lightly on his arm as she passed, where he stood, holding open the door. He never forgot these minor attentions. "You don't mind, surely, Philip? I think the new housemaid will do, and Cook knows your favourite dishes in case you should return before me." As he did not answer she moved on. "I've ordered coffee upstairs. It's cooler there, now that the sun has gone down."

He followed, pausing for a moment to gather up the evening paper that lay on the landing table before a set of volumes of reference, neatly bound in morocco. One of the headlines caught his attention. Sheila, who had reached the stairs, glanced back over her shoulder, the action as graceful as a picture by Greuze, whose youthful models she resembled, with the same wide brows and rounded limbs. Then, with her long trailing dress, where the little black sequins rustled softly like young leaves stirred by a breeze, she began to mount the steep old steps. At the corner she turned again. Her husband was standing under the lamp, reading a lengthy paragraph on the first page, stooping slightly, a frown on his face, his mouth a thin line. Through the black hair brushed sleekly across his head there showed a gleam of white, the first sign of approaching baldness; his shoulders looked sharp, his chest hollow. She gave an involuntary sigh.

The maid slipped past him with the coffee and followed her mistress up the stairs.

When she reached the drawing-room, Sheila pulled the two arm-chairs up to the open window. The lamps in the street below were lighted. In the distance she could hear the bells of hansoms and the dull rumble of buses down Oxford Street. She waited, impatient, watching the steam rise from the delicate coffee-cups and fade away, on the table beside her. The clock ticked noisily, emphasizing the passing of time. Outside, the woodwork creaked as though light feet trod the boards.

It seemed to her a final test of the place she held in her husband's affections. They had been parted for six weeks and this was their first evening together. Surely he would remember this? With the close air and confined space of the grim old house, her nerves were strung to an acute state of tension. She listened, hearing her heart beat. At last came a familiar sound, a door opening.

It was closed with a quiet deliberation. Philip had gone back to his study.

CHAPTER XII

IT was market-day at Wallingford. Sheila, emerging from the *Lamb*, where the old coaching entrance was used as an arched court for the guests, with wicker chairs and little tables, found herself in a busy crowd, the narrow streets congested with carts and hot, complaining droves of cattle.

She followed in the general direction and soon reached the market-place, amused by the unusual stir in the sleepy little town. She had been there now for a week, most of her days spent in a punt, exploring the upper reaches, where the river dwindled to half its size and curved at will, losing its last hint of fashion, a silver stream sauntering through the drowsy countryside.

She had been happy, at peace with herself, and delighted to find that her early skill in rowing and punting had not failed her. She liked, too, the old-fashioned hostel with its attentive, capable host; a man who had previously been connected with a well-known public school, and had gained from this a broader outlook on life than that of his present business. With him she gossiped in the evenings, pleasantly tired from the long day, and glad to laze in the entrance and study the constantly changing guests and the townsfolk tripping past towards the fine stone bridge with its twenty arches and massive ribs, which date from the thirteenth century. She had explored the Castle ruins that once sheltered Queen Matilda after her escape from Oxford and witnessed the death of a royal consort, the widow of the Black Prince, and had tried from the few traces remaining to picture the feudal keep demolished under Cromwell's rule.

Now, as she dawdled in the sunshine, drinking in the primitive scene—the Town Hall, with its worn pillars, and the ivy-splashed church beyond against a sky of shimmering blue—she felt regretful at the thought of returning to town on the morrow. Passing the busy Corn Exchange she walked down the narrow street; one of the four that seem to support the market-place at each corner like the poles of a Sedan chair. Here she crossed the road to peep into the yard of the Police Station, gay with a fern-covered rockery and hanging baskets of flowering plants which seemed to her an unusual feature of the grim haunt of the law. A litter of spaniel puppies were romping around their mother in the shade, like a school of porpoises, fat and shining, absurdly eager and filled with a frantic zest for life. She tried to coax one to her feet, but after a first unsteady approach, it overbalanced, turned, and fled with a shrill squeal to its anxious parent. Sheila laughed and passed on, avoiding a harassed red cow with a tiny calf at her heels which had taken a fancy to the pavement, and a stout woman with a basket who forced a ruthless way for herself. No rule of the road prevailed here. Suddenly her eyes fell on a little shop facing her. It brought her to a sudden halt, and she went across to explore.

For the window was filled with faded prints, cracked china, battered coins, a hideous tray of false teeth with a coral necklace draped across it, and all the flotsam of country sale-rooms covered by the dust of ages. She lifted the latch and walked in, to find herself in a long dark room, low-ceilinged and packed with objects defaced by use, both old and modern. From the farther end arose voices. She waited, examining a dish which she took to be either Leeds or Wedgwood. She could see the shopman bargaining with a pair of customers, a tall man and a woman, over a faded Paisley shawl.

"You take the other end and we'll hold it out to the light," she heard the former suggest to his wife. "It's probably full of holes. Mind how you go!" But he spoke too late. There came a crash of broken china. "There—you've done it!" The man laughed.

"Oh, Tim! I'm so sorry."

Sheila jumped at the well-known accents. She moved forward impulsively.

"Cara!"

The culprit wheeled round.

"Why, it's Sheila!"

They stared at each other. A faint trace of hostility showed at first in the pretty face with its pointed chin and wide, dark eyes, but it vanished before Sheila's smile. Her decision had been quickly made. Why prolong the family feud? She had always been fond of her cousin and now she was her own mistress.

"This *is* nice!" Her voice was warm. "Who would have thought of meeting you here?"

Cara's air of tension vanished; she clasped the hand extended to her.

"The same old Sheila! You're just in time to save me from a fine lecture." She pointed, laughing, to a figure which the shopman held, a shepherdess who had met the same fate as King Charles. "She's lost her head—like myself! But now Tim can't scold me." She gave her husband a mischievous glance.

The years had dealt lightly with her. Her figure was fuller, but her face held the old piquancy, with a subtle difference. There was less sharpness in her humour; for Cara was a happier woman. Craik, too, had altered little. He shook hands heartily with Sheila, inwardly pleased by her manner. He resented any slight to his wife, and welcomed the reconciliation with this cousin of hers whom he liked. He had the same infectious smile and eager look, intensified when speaking by slightly prominent teeth that lifted his upper lip. It gave him a certain boyish charm, despite the grizzled hair on his temples.

All this Sheila noted as Cara prattled on, more volatile than ever, to hide her slight nervousness. Sheila learnt that the pair were only in Wallingford for the day. They lived three stations down the line at a village on the edge of the downs.

"In a windmill," Cara declared. "Isn't it, Tim?" Her husband nodded. "At least the car lives there—our only link with civilization. We prefer the farm in bad weather. Though Mick doesn't! Did you know I had a son? He's a darling. With red hair. An accident—the hair, I mean! You *must* see him. When can you come?"

The shopman was fidgeting with the shawl, still draped over Craik's arm. He held it out to his wife.

"One minute, old lady—do you want this?" For the door bell had jingled again and another customer was waiting.

"Yes. If I can have it cheap?" Cara smiled at the owner. "I'll risk the holes for—thirty shillings?" She spoilt the effect by turning to Sheila. "Isn't it a heavenly colour?"

The shopman held out for two guineas. They compromised eventually by splitting the difference. Because of a tear in the fringe that worthy "reduced" the shepherdess, charging them twice its actual value, so every one was satisfied. Sheila bought the "Leeds-Wedgwood" dish, though Tim had doubts and called it "Coalport."

"It's only his nonsense," Cara explained. "He loves to be thought a connoisseur. He was nicely had about a clock—I'll tell you later, not here. We're coming to the *Lamb* for lunch." She slipped a hand through Sheila's arm. "I'm so glad you're alone; we can have a good chat. Can't you drive back with us and stay over the week-end? Do? It would be such fun."

Sheila considered the tempting proposal.

"I'm afraid I must go home to-morrow. Philip is expecting me."

But Cara refused to be serious.

"It's the unexpected that always happens! It's good for men to be kept waiting. Just send him a wire—he'll understand. You simply *must* see Mick!"

Sheila was not at all sure that Philip would "understand." He might not approve of the Craiks or consider them "useful" people. Yet Cara was a near relation. That could be her

argument, and she felt that a refusal now might be misconstrued by the pair. She was grateful to Cara for the way she had ignored past coldness on the part of the Traverses, and the adventure tempted her. She cast prudence overboard.

"It's awfully nice of you to ask me. If you're quite sure you've room for me?"

"You shall sit on Tim's knee!"

"Do," said Craik, and they all laughed.

"With the luggage on top," the guest suggested.

"And the egg-boxes in your hat. Oh, and there are the new fowls——" Cara gave way to her mirth. "It will look like the Ark coming home."

They emerged into the sunny street, a hideous parcel in newspaper held courageously by Craik.

"I hope you haven't bought a calf," Sheila suggested, "or a pig?"

"No; we only go in for poultry," Craik answered the inquiry. "Now, here's a ripping idea, Cara. We'll give Sheila a turkey at Christmas. She can ask her rich friends dinner—a splendid advertisement. *Craik's Prime Gobblers* on the menu. It will lay the foundations of our fortune."

"Instead of eggs!" Cara was ribald. She saw that her cousin looked mystified. "Didn't you know? We're poultry farmers. It was Tim's original idea. He hated having nothing to do, after he left the army. *I* don't mind! Not so long as he feeds the chickens himself at dawn. I made that a stipulation. So I lie in my warm bed while poor old Tim flounders about in sea-boots and pretends that the dew is good for his complexion."

"Lazy isn't the word for her!" said Craik. "That's why she's getting fat. As a matter of fact"—his voice sobered—"it was jolly hard work for both at the start. You've no idea how much we had to learn—by bitter experience! But now at last it's beginning to pay. Mick will be a millionaire. I like it. I wanted a hobby, and we're both fond of country life. So we bought the Windmill Farm." He paused, stepping

into the road to avoid the congestion on the pavement, and went on with his confidences, seeing the interest in Sheila's face. "It was rather a plunge, and we had to go slow. But we're doing the place up bit by bit and I wouldn't live anywhere else now." He glanced at his wife. "Would you?"

"No." Her smile was a revelation.

Sheila was inwardly surprised. She never would have believed that Cara would settle down to this quiet life; Cara, loving society, always strung up to excitement. Yet here she was in her country clothes, her skin browned by wind and sunshine, keeping a poultry farm with Tim.

Could love work this miracle? If Sandy—— She thrust the thought far from her. It seemed disloyal. Yet in her heart she envied the Craiks. Co-partnership, but closer still for the passionate love that bound them.

They lunched in the long annexe built out from the old hotel. A table ran down one side, with steaming joints that swiftly vanished before a large party of farmers who indulged in many a sly joke at this weekly gathering; men, for the most part, middle-aged with the healthy vigour of open-air life, argumentative and wise, with a hint of that pessimism which is skin-deep and seems to be the habitual mannerism of those whose efforts largely depend on the weather.

Many of them nodded to Craik, and he went across to shake hands with the oldest of the party whilst Sheila led Cara upstairs and they gossiped over her light packing. She parted regretfully from her host after coffee and a liqueur, in which they drank to the luck of the house. Sheila tried to picture her husband in a similar scene and smiled in her sleeve. Philip was always conventional. He would have cast over their adieux a cloud of veiled patronage. He was essentially a townsman. Then they packed into the car amidst laughter and advice, Tim's final comment being: "It doesn't matter how it looks so long as nothing falls out," and set forth on their journey, passing the little china shop, where the four roads meet, which owed its prosperity to the fact that its awkward angle invited collisions.

"The windows are always getting smashed; the crockery too, and since it's insured the proprietor makes a good thing of it," Tim explained as they bowled along, skirting the enigmatic "Bull Ring" and the "Kinecroft," now a hillocky waste used as a recreation ground but bearing traces of fortifications which legend asserted had been there for over a thousand years.

Into the open country they sped, Sheila sitting beside Tim, her feet on her little suit-case, her lap filled with sundry parcels, an occasional nervous cluck from the fowls in their crate perched on the hat-box behind, to which Cara clung, laughing—a happy trio, full of life. Soon the lowland gave place to hills, the first billowing curves of the downs; woods, tipped with autumn's glory, vanished as the air grew keen. They were mounting, and the curving lanes with the light brown soil straightened out and took on the white glare of chalk, as they found themselves in the sister county. Villages with thatched roofs, farm-houses in grey stone, with deep old barns where the lichen clung, touching the scheme of silver with bronze, broke the monotony of the road; farm wagons, painted blue, with carters oblivious of their horn or wilfully deaf, made way for them reluctantly; hysterical hens scattered in panic and the dust rose like smoke in their wake. At last they slowed down at the entrance to a hamlet that clustered about a church with a grey tower and a tithe barn.

"Nearly there!" Cara cried, leaning forward to Sheila's ear. "We turn here, and you'll see the windmill." She clutched at the fowls as they rounded the curve. "Above you—look!"

Sheila obeyed.

On the top of a hill gaunt sails were turning slowly on the breeze against a wide sky of blue, flecked by clouds like mother of pearl. Below the mill was a dove-coloured house on sloping land where a broad field, with close-clipped hedges, was starred with white, indistinct objects that caught the sunshine against a dark belt of firs.

"Those are the fowl houses." Cara's voice was full of

excitement. "Now you can see my little greenhouse. Tim gave it to me for my birthday. Our land starts at that first gate. It all belongs to us after that. To the top of the hill," she added proudly.

Her husband eagerly put in an oar. "You should have seen it when we came! The hedges hadn't been clipped for years and the garden was a wilderness. Of course, there's a lot to be done still."

"But that's so nice," suggested Sheila. "To plan ahead all sorts of improvements."

"Rather!" His face was beaming. "Here's the lane—our 'carriage drive.'" They bumped over caked ruts, passed through an open gate with a farmyard on their left and a fenced-in garden on the right, and drew up at the side porch.

"Mummy, mummy!" A child's voice hailed them joyously and a little figure darted out, bare-legged, with sandalled feet and a shock of red curls.

"Mick!" Cara jumped down and the child bounded into her arms. "That will do—you're throttling me!" She laughed, her face warm and tender. "Here's a new playmate for you, 'Cousin Sheila.' Give her a kiss."

But the small boy had flown to his father and was dancing round his long legs.

Tim swung him up in the air.

"Well, old chap, going strong? I hope you haven't got into mischief."

The stray arrow hit the mark. Mick, on terra firma again, fidgeted and kicked on the grass.

"I didn't mean to—— Nanny says——" A fresh start with a quick glance up at the tall, listening figure. "He got out quite sudden and I've been scolded—please, I *have*! He hasn't rooted up—much."

"You young rascal! The pig again."

Sheila laughed. Mick wheeled round, conscious of unforeseen support. Then he lifted his chubby face, with a dimpling smile of approval. She bent down and felt soft lips frankly pressed to her cheek. The caress roused in her heart a new,

almost poignant, longing. Here was a welcome denied to her in Philip's grim old house. How good it must be to come home to the touch of warm little hands and the eager chatter of a child. Was this what her life lacked?

She followed Cara across the hall, littered with sticks and overcoats and a gaily painted little cart, guns in a rack, gardening tools, and everything that Tim called "handy," and into a wide sunny room with a bay window that looked on the garden, where roses in their second bloom hung heavy heads and the air was full of the drowsy hum of bees at work.

"This is our den," Cara announced. "We live here. I haven't a drawing-room. Because I found that I never used it! Tim likes a big chair and all his own things round him, and it's cosier in the winter. In the summer we use the mill most. We've turned the basement into a garage, and above that is a jolly place where Tim has his carpenter's bench and Mick plays in wet weather. It's a primitive establishment, not at all like Mayfair." She smiled, with a teasing glance at her cousin.

"Thank heaven!" said Sheila abruptly.

Cara wondered at her expression.

"I don't believe she's happy," she thought. "I remember Antrobus—a *stick*! Why ever did she marry him? I'm quite sure she was fond of Sandy." But she kept her impressions to herself.

Sheila's eyes were wandering about.

"This is the sort of room," she decided, "that women will have in the days to come—a place to live in, not only for show. That's when we all work at something. We shall leave boudoirs to those men whose wives are foolish enough to support them, or enfeebled male spinsters!" She spoke with a touch of malice.

Cara smiled, raising her eyebrows.

"Don't tell me you're a Suffragette?"

"Of course I am." Sheila nodded. "I've been one now for four years."

"You frighten me! Do you break windows? Promise

you'll respect ours. The nearest glazier lives miles away." Cara looked mischievous. "But you always wanted to be a man. I remember that. Do you still?" Her voice was rather curious.

"At times." Sheila changed the subject, watching her cousin pull out the pins from her hat and loosen her soft, fair hair with a gesture of relief. "You haven't altered a bit, Cara."

"Oh yes, I have." She smiled wisely. "Do you wonder?" She turned to the younger woman in a sudden desire for sympathy, conscious of their common blood. "It's not been all smooth sailing since you and I last met, my dear. But I've never regretted the step I took. Tim was worth it. We're very happy. And Mick—— You haven't any children?"

"No."

Cara's face softened.

"Well, you'll understand when that happens. It makes all the difference. It did between me and Tim. Although he's always been devoted, I used to feel my position. It's not nice to be slighted by friends and to know you can't justify yourself, although in your heart you feel you're right. And of course we weren't well off, and I missed many little things. Tim regretted the army too. But when Mick came it seemed as if everything had been forgiven! Tim was a dear when I was ill, and he's so proud of his son." She added with a little laugh, reverting to her old manner, "Although he's got red hair and I can't account for it!" A memory rose in her mind. "You used to admire red hair."

"Sandy's?"

Their eyes met.

"*Poor* Sandy!" Cara smiled. "He was head over ears in love with you."

Sheila nodded. It was true. And yet—— How puzzling life was! Would it have been a happier marriage? She felt tempted to confide in Cara all her doubts and troubles; this new Cara who had passed through the fire of suffering, yet was still the old Cara, bound by the link of childhood days.

Her cousin read the thought in her face. But the moment

was inopportune. She could see Tim crossing the lawn after taking the car to the mill. His voice swept the pair apart with the slightly guilty look of women caught at a disadvantage.

"Now, you gossips, where's tea?" He thrust his shoulders through the window. "I know what you're doing—talking dress and planning some extravagance." His twinkling eyes surveyed Sheila. "Don't you lead my wife astray. Come out and see the chickens."

. . . . . .

The old sails with their gaping holes where the woodwork had succumbed to Time creaked mournfully overhead; bats circled in the twilight. Through the narrow windows of the mill, Sheila could see a violet haze blotting out the lines of the downs. Night was coming over the hills.

She lay on a rug at Cara's feet in the quaint circular room, her head on her cousin's lap, with an intimate sense of well-being. For little by little the elder woman had gleaned from her the history of the past five years, and Sheila felt the relief of unburdening her mind. Cara had proved sympathetic. She had seen both sides of life, and under her gay and frivolous manner she hid both intuition and knowledge. She had weighed men in the balance, and it seemed to her that Antrobus was not unlike her first husband in his self-centred ambition. But here the similarity ended. She realized to the full the mistake that Sheila had made in her life. Absorbed in her own maternity, she believed that a child would bring to her cousin the missing gift of happiness. Marriage, even where love existed, partook largely of a habit. Sheila would grow accustomed to Philip, if only she could find some object on which to lavish her affections. Work would never fill the gulf.

"If she doesn't have a baby soon, she'll fall in love with some other man." This was Cara's private conviction. But she kept it wisely to herself. To Sheila's surprise, she pitied Sandy.

"I think you were rather hard on him. He would probably have settled down, once he had married you. I've seen him since your engagement ended. Tim met him up in town and

brought him down for the week-end. He was very nice. I must say I think there's a lot of good in Sandy. You were such a child—that was the trouble! You didn't know what love was. I don't believe you do now." A pause. "Do you —honestly?"

"I'm not sure." It was blurted out. "I was really very fond of Philip. He seemed so dependable."

Cara gave an amused laugh.

"What a reason! The sort of thing one says about one's grandfather. Couldn't you have lived without him?"

"That wasn't the idea at all." Sheila sounded rather indignant.

"No? Well, ask yourself that question if ever you meet another man—I mean," she caught herself up in time, "that's a pretty good test. But it's no good looking back. The point is, you and Philip seem drifting hopelessly apart. My advice to you—though it sounds shameless—is to make desperate love to him!" She laughed. "Don't let him forget you're his wife! I think you're inclined to snub men. I know you used to, years ago, and this wounds their vanity. It won't answer with your husband. Coax him into a good temper. If this doesn't do, have it out and say that he's neglecting you. He's a shrewd man, and the money's yours. Show him you don't mean to pay and have no fun in return. Refuse to entertain his friends unless he's more considerate. I wouldn't do it for any man—not even for Tim—on those terms! He's taking too much for granted."

"I see." Sheila lifted her head and stared across the shadowy space. "It means pocketing my pride."

"Not at all. I don't agree. You're a champion of women's rights. Haven't married women any?" She smiled down at the thoughtful face. "It really is a paradox; both of you working for the Vote to ensure public recognition, yet you're ignored in your private life. I should strike if I were you. But try the persuasive plan first. You're a taking little person when you choose. What would Philip say if you flirted with other men?"

"I don't know. I've never tried."

The simple answer amused Cara.

"Well, I don't recommend the process. It could put you hopelessly in the wrong. Besides, it's dangerous. You might end by falling in love."

"Never!" Sheila's voice was scornful.

"Touch wood!" said Cara quickly. "Does that sound superstitious?" She spoke lightly in order to cover a momentary touch of fear. She had wandered down these very paths. For her love affair with Tim had been started in a moment of matrimonial pique. "Try flirting with your husband. If he isn't made of stone, he'll respond. My dear girl"—she became serious—"I've seen a good deal of life, and I don't think submission pays. It's the troublesome women who hold a man, not the unselfish ones. It's all wrong from an ethical standpoint, but we aren't angels—we're human beings. Two people can't be altruistic at the same moment—it's a deadlock. A woman who always gives way to her husband is invariably trodden upon. It has to be a mutual affair, and men respect opposition. It puts them upon their mettle." She smoothed the dark head on her knee, and a short silence fell between them. "Write to me when you're in the mood. *Anything*—I'll burn your letters. I've had such a bad time myself, I don't want to see you go through the same old misery."

"But you're happy now?"

"Absolutely." There was conviction in the word. "All the same I often wish I could have met Tim first. It doesn't do to marry for money or for anything else except love. But I was young, and my people were poor. Charlie fascinated me, and I thought a home of my own would be nice. It wasn't." She gave a bitter laugh. "Now I think we've talked enough. I shall have to go and see Mick in his bath, where he holds an audience. But first I want to light the lamp and show you my latest photos. Up you get!" She rose to her feet and hunted round for the matches.

It was Sheila who discovered them. She watched Cara

turn up the wick, her arms raised, a graceful figure with its hint of maternity. The pretty face looked a trifle sad, haunted by the old troubles. Yet she knew that her cousin was happy at last.

The room took on colour and form, with its scrubbed floor, bright with rugs, and the simple furniture: arm-chairs, well worn, and a sofa, across which was spread the gay old Paisley shawl. In the window was Tim's carpenter's bench, with crisp shavings and some laths designed for the chicken coops. A table beyond it bore some curtains half-finished and a sewing machine. Everywhere in the Windmill Farm were traces of occupations shared, the perpetual companionship of these two who had deemed the world well lost for love. Here was true co-partnership; but, unlike her own, it included a child. . . .

The longing rose again. Cara was right. Here was a dream that made the future possible.

She stirred herself and came back to the present, gazing round at the old walls. They were whitewashed and decorated by innumerable photographs, glazed and bound with black ribbons of paper in place of the orthodox frames.

"Tim does this in the winter evenings," Cara explained. "He gets the glass cut for him—the rest is easy. Seccotine covers a host of sins! Most of the views are snapshots which I enlarge. My favourite hobby. I'm rather proud of this one." She pointed to a pretty picture of an old church with a yew hedge. "It's a local curiosity. I believe there are only three in England, and two of them are in this county. You see, it has a tower *and* a spire. The story runs that two old ladies endowed it, and quarrelled over this point. Eventually they compromised; built a steeple at one end and a tower at the other. I don't know which holds the bells, or if there is a double peal. The effect is quaint, but it doesn't look clumsy. We might drive there to-night. Oh, I forgot—it was a surprise. We had planned a spin in the moonlight. Would you like it—after supper?"

"I think it would be simply lovely." Sheila was enthusi-

astic. "I'm so fond of motoring. I wish it weren't my last evening."

"So do I. You must come again. Just write and say when you want a change."

"I will." She bent to examine a view that seemed strangely familiar. "Where's this?"

Her voice was so eager that Cara glanced up, surprised.

"That? Oh, a road across the downs. It's not a good photograph, but I keep it because of Tim's cousin in the foreground. He posed for it."

"How curious! I've got a picture at home of the same place. I'm sure of it. That long white road up the hill, which breaks off against the sky. Mine shows a stormy day. This must have been taken in sunshine, and it doesn't look half so wild. Couldn't we go there? I'd like to see it."

"We might, but I want to show you the church. We'll keep it for your next visit. There's a lovely village over the brow, in a wooded hollow, the haunt of artists. That's where Val was staying. I'd like you to know Valentine Logue. I wonder what you'd think of him. I've got a better photo somewhere." She hunted for it in a drawer and held it out for her cousin's inspection. "He's a character—but we both love him. An artist and a vagabond! He wants knowing, like most people who have any personality."

Sheila took it in her hands with a feeling of reluctance. In some curious way she resented the lounging figure by the path. It seemed to her a desecration of her beloved picture. It marred the original conception—her title of "The Empty Road."

She studied the strong face in silence. Not handsome, she decided. The chin was too square, and he looked untidy with his rough, thick hair and shaggy brows. Yet the eager eyes were arresting, they challenged her; and about the face and the set of the head on the full, deep throat was an air of power. Here was a man sure of himself and careless of the world's opinion, down to the choice of his clothes.

Cara leaned over her shoulder.

"He's a Bohemian, of course, loathes all society. But he drops down on us sometimes when he's sure that we're alone."

"Then I'm not likely to meet him," laughed Sheila.

She felt an instinctive relief. Her own will was pretty strong, but here was a stronger, and at once it roused in her the fighting instinct.

"I don't know." Cara smiled. Mischief warmed her dark eyes. "I think it might be good for you both—an interesting experiment. Val, and a Suffragette! He'd be scared to death, though he wouldn't show it. I'd like to see you try and convert him. He's opposed to everything in life that wars with his idea of beauty. He's retrograde about women." A step came up the creaking stairs, and she called to her husband: "Come here, Tim! I'm plotting something. It will amuse you. I want Sheila to know Val."

"Splendid!" He laughed at her. "They'd get on like a house on fire. After they'd had a good row!"

"There—you see!" Cara nodded. "I'm sure he'd prove a fine tonic when you're feeling tired of town. I *must* work it. He lives in London when he isn't tramping the countryside. And you'd love his mother—she's a dear! She has six sons, and they all adore her. She goes to stay with them in turn, and upsets all their bachelor habits. She says it's so good for them! She drives poor old Val distracted by tidying up his studio, and when she moves on to Ralph, who's neat and dapper, she 'rummages'—to use her own pet expression. She's a dainty old lady with beautiful hands—and nothing in the world can shock her! The boys tell her everything. She's depraved and genial and deeply religious."

"My dear girl, what a description!" Tim tried to look severe. "I can't have you slandering my aunt." He chuckled. "Though it's rather true—if you don't take it literally. Dear old Aunt Tab! I believe it was under her wing that I went to my first music-hall as a small boy, home from school. She had the supreme tact to insist on my protection in doubtful surroundings. No wonder that she won my heart!"

"And she took you on to supper at Scott's and gave you

the money to pay for it—under cover of the table! That was the final touch. It looked as though you were treating her. I remember your telling me the story the first time I met Val. When he was so rude to me!" Cara smiled teasingly, but Tim was not to be drawn.

"Was he? Just like him! Still, he's stuck to us through thick and thin." It was evident that he loved his cousin. "I think he deserves to know Sheila." He gave her a sunny glance. "We'll send you a wire when next he comes. 'The Bear's caged. Expecting you.' Then you must post down at once, leaving the delights of town."

"Supposing I frighten him away? Will you blame me?" laughed Sheila. "I shouldn't like to be scolded for breaking up the menagerie."

"We'll risk that, if you'll promise to come." Cara laid a hand on her arm. "Is it settled? Before the weather breaks, and we'll take you both for long drives. Swear—by the Great Panjandrum—that you'll come, when we've caught Val."

The familiar vow of her childhood roused vivid recollections. The soft, dark eyes looked into hers with the same laughing touch of mischief. Sheila gave in:

"I'll do my best."

"I shall keep you to that! Now we'll go to Mick. I expect his bath is over by now." She looked at the clock anxiously. "But I always hear him say his prayers. They're rather lengthy affairs sometimes, as he prays for all the animals."

"And 'make Blobs a good pig.'" Tim mimicked his son and heir. "That's true—he did! I roared, and Cara turned me out of the room. The pig has a fascination for him. They stare at each other solemnly. I suppose it's because of Mick's carroty hair. There must be Irish blood somewhere. It's lucky he's got my even temper." He looked wickedly at his wife.

They passed out into the still evening and made their way down the slope. Already stars were beginning to peer over the purple line of the downs; a cool wind stirred the firs that sheltered the garden from the north, and a faint aromatic

scent was wafted towards them from the branches. Everywhere was silence and peace. The trio, walking abreast, felt its subtle influence. No word passed between them, but Sheila saw the man's arm close round his wife's shoulders. She leaned against him happily, an unconscious action familiarized by that strongest of all links, habit. Over Cara's fair head Sheila could see Tim's profile, still youthful, filled with content, his eyes fixed on the low, grey house. Home, love, companionship: these bounded his simple ambition.

It added to her loneliness as she watched Mick being put to bed.

CHAPTER XIII

SHEILA found on her return a telegram forwarded from the *Lamb*, and also a letter from her husband explaining in his careful fashion that he was detained by important work and would not be home before Wednesday. It was couched in more affectionate language. He hoped she would stay at Wallingford for the week-end. It was evident that their letters had crossed. He reminded her that her birthday was due on the day in question, and suggested that she should take tickets for a theatre that evening. She could rely on his being back in time to dress for an early dinner.

She was pleased by this unwonted attention. It seemed a happy augury for the new campaign planned by Cara. For the glimpse she had caught of the Craiks' life had unsettled some of her theories; notably the one which concerned the satisfaction of "work" *per se*.

The letter was signed "Your affectionate husband," and she wound round this the passing thought that, albeit undemonstrative, he could be relied upon as faithful. She had never suffered from his conduct where other women were concerned, as Cara had done in her life with Charles. She was the only woman he cared for. Well, she would make him care still more!

She found among her correspondence a letter from Magda, in London again, after a holiday spent in Sweden. A delightful time—so she wrote—Swedish women so progressive, miles ahead of their English sisters. She wanted to see Sheila at once. Could she look in that afternoon at the Writers' Club, where Magda would be at four o'clock. There were stirring days ahead of them.

The quick, intensive sentences on office paper awoke in Sheila the old thrill of enthusiasm, spurring her on to active work. For Magda's personality emerged from everything she touched. She was like a flame, Sheila thought, destroying all that was trivial on its outward path, cleansing the way for her army of followers, a brilliant light shining afar over the swamps of abuse and tradition.

This mood of exaltation survived a damp walk down the Strand, where she paused to take the theatre tickets, conscious of a fine rain that melted the caked grime of town and rose steaming from umbrellas as she turned at last towards the river. Even the dark basement room of the club, with its smell of wet garments, stale air, and the curious unrest peculiar to feminine meeting-places, could not detract from the swift pleasure she felt as she saw Magda's form outlined against the window: the vivid profile, heavy hair, and the old familiar pose, shoulders bent a little forward, the long white hands clasped on her knees.

"At last!" Magda rose to greet her. "I hoped you'd come. Sit down—I've only five minutes—a train to catch. How well you look! So brown and healthy." She tossed back her veil impatiently and kissed Sheila on both cheeks. "I've just got rid of Ernestine Dale. How she talks! But she may be useful. I hope that I've persuaded her to write a series of articles for us in an evening paper. We're planning——" Off she went at once into the business of the moment, presenting a swift survey of essentials and skimming over all minor details. "There, you see? That's the idea. No more clerical work for you. Speeches—that's your line, my dear. We must whip in your husband too. He's such a *force*—he carries weight." She broke off, smiling and triumphant. "I made that marriage, didn't I? I brought you together. And such a success! Is Mr. Antrobus at home?"

"No, but he returns on Wednesday."

"Good." Magda scribbled a note on the back of a sheaf of papers, then looked up, with frowning brows. "Do you know a Mrs. Talbot Priest?"

"I've met her." Sheila smiled.

"Then meet her again," laughed Magda. "She could pull some useful wires for us. Through Roper—you understand?"

"Quite." The blue and the dark eyes met.

"A case of 'suffering fools gladly.' I leave the pleasant task to you. Perhaps you could get them both to lunch? I could come, and bring"—she paused, doubtful—"Lady Dule, that's it! Mrs. Priest is climbing—*hard!* Caroline must be sacrificed." Her beautiful, even teeth flashed between the resolute, full lips that curved with a hint of passion. She had Spanish blood in her veins, and even the rain-splashed felt hat and the short tweed dress could not detract from her appearance, always arresting with its picturesque, half-foreign charm. She rose to her feet regretfully. "I must go, my child. Time is flying. Can you dine with me on Sunday night? A picnic meal at the flat. I'll try, for once, to be alone."

Her hand lay on Sheila's arm with its supple fingers where one big ring, in which a fine opal was set, enhanced the whiteness of her skin. The pressure tightened lovingly, as her friend agreed, and Magda lingered.

"You're looking absurdly young to-day. Where have you been all this summer?"

"To Ireland, with my father. But this last week-end I spent in the country with my cousin, Cara Craik. I wonder if you've ever met her?"

Mrs. Hill thought for a moment.

"Craik? Oh yes—I remember. So they're married now. Is it successful?"

"Quite." Sheila's face was grave.

Magda shrugged her fine shoulders.

"*Tant mieux!* That's one of the things we shall straighten out by and by. The divorce laws are too unequal. Would she be any good to us?"

"I don't think so. She's so absorbed in her country life and her little son."

"Oh, there's a child. Craik's child?"

Sheila nodded, her cheeks warming. She saw the question in Magda's eyes.

"That's all right. They've been married for years." Her loyalty was on the defensive.

"It ought to be, in any case." Mrs. Hill looked aggressive. "It's an abominable thing that a child should be made to suffer for the sins of the parents. In France they show more judgment. Marriage legitimizes offspring. But here smug self-righteousness insists on punishment for the *victim*, whose innocence is beyond suspicion—the logic of the Mad Hatter! Well, there's a better time coming. I've great faith in the future." They moved together towards the stairs, mounted them, and paused in the entrance. "I must have a hansom."

The porter whistled, and there came the jingle of distant bells as the cab turned up from the Embankment.

"Can I give you a lift? To Charing Cross?"

Sheila glanced up at the sky. The rain had ceased, and a pale sun, in a watery halo, was struggling to shine.

"No, thanks. I'd rather walk."

She waved to her friend and started forth up the incline, immersed in thought. For Magda had left behind her a long train of speculation. Sheila's mind turned back to the Craiks; to Mick with his sunny face and wide blue eyes, so pure and trustful. He had escaped the ban of the law; but what of those other pitiful waifs, the result of love unauthorized? Of *love*! Here was a mockery. Above all, an injustice. The parents should be made to suffer, not the second generation.

So absorbed was she that, as she turned the sharp corner, she narrowly missed cannoning into a hurrying figure: that of a tall, thin man. For a moment they chasé-ed from side to side absurdly in their efforts to pass, then she gave an exclamation of surprise and amusement and held out her hand.

"Why, it's you!"

Patrick Ryan was frowning down into her face.

"Sheil—— Mrs. Antrobus!"

His confused recognition completed her mirth.

"Did you think I was a ghost?" she laughed.

"Not exactly." He still looked startled, for they had not met for some years. The shadow of Sandy in those days had stood between them, Pat divided in his heart through loyalty to his friend and a genuine liking for the Traverses.

Through Sheila's mind at this new encounter flashed the thought that it was strange to be met by another link with her girlhood. First Mrs. Frost, then Cara and Pat; all in the space of a short three weeks.

She saw his sombre face break up into the old merry wrinkles.

"You nearly spoilt my tea, you know." He held out a cardboard box that bore the name of a pastry-cook. "Covering me with shame and cream!"

"Are you going to picnic in the Strand?" She laughed outright.

He was just the same, angular, with moody brows that belied the twinkle in his eyes.

"Yes. On an island with the policeman. An advertisement of my new book. It's a volume of verse entitled *Somewhere*, so people will now locate the spot." Oblivious of the passers-by, he struck a tragic attitude. "'Out, out, etcetera spot!'"

"*Pat!*" She corrected him, aware of the amazed giggle of a pair of shop-girls at her elbow. It seemed so natural to slip back into the old friendly ways.

Ryan, too, felt the spell.

"Sorry! Come and share the buns. Do! I'm expecting some ladies to tea—so it's quite proper. In the Temple." He looked down at her wistfully. "You might give me your moral support. I'm scared to death at the prospect. And you'd give it an air"—he waved his hand—"an air——" He stuck.

Sheila prompted.

"Of a 'Christian home with every comfort.'"

"That's it—'central heating'! What nonsense I'm talking. But do come."

She hesitated, smiling at him, and suddenly she became aware that tea was the one thing she craved, overlooked by the busy Magda.

"Shall I have to pour out?" Her voice was teasing, but he guessed that he had won the day.

"Undoubtedly." They fell into step in a tacit acceptance of the plan.

He gave her a sidelong glance.

"That's a nice hat. May one say so? I like the little Mercury wings. You're a messenger of hope and comfort. You may yet save me from disaster." He hummed a song under his breath. "'O Vision of Spring!' . . . Really, you know, you don't look a day older. How do you manage it?"

"Who has been teaching you to flatter?"

"No one. It was envy. An instinctive tribute that rose from the depths of my—boots!" He chuckled, watching her face. "You didn't expect that, did you? The fact is they're new boots. I can't keep my mind off them. *Il faut souffrir pour être beau.* They seem to shrink in moist weather. Or perhaps the shock of meeting you—so *forcibly*—round the corner has affected my circulation. Do you always go at that pace, with your eyes modestly on the ground?"

"Generally. I hate dawdling."

"Ye gods! Why, it's the cream of life; hurry but the skim milk."

"You don't seem to grow fat on it." She turned laughing eyes on him. "Which reminds me—— A certain lady, once a dear friend of yours, lunched with me not long ago; looking so bonny—Mrs. Frost. *Now*, aren't you glad to see me? I can give you all the latest news."

"H'm!" He scowled. "I'm not sure that I want my past raked up. I've buried it—for better things."

They turned the dark arch dividing the busy street from the Temple. Sheila gave him a quick glance. Something in the tone of his voice had aroused her curiosity.

"Tell me. I'm most discreet. Is this the reason for those cakes? I'll hazard a guess. *She's* coming to tea?"

"Well——" He looked profoundly depressed. "It's her mother too—an awful business. The most material woman on earth! Doris—of course you'll like Doris—every one does, she's—oh, you'll see. But Mrs. Spink——"

"Pat! What an awful name!"

"I know." He shrugged his thin shoulders. "Still, it holds a consolation. Any girl would want to change it." His face wrinkled, and he laughed. "'Doris Spink'—a calamity! But 'Doris *Ryan*'? It glides on the tongue, like a well-turned phrase—or perhaps butter? If only her mother were not approaching, so—rococo, I should feel joyous as the crystalline air, instead of in the seventh hell! She'll spy out the nakedness of the land; she reduces everything to dollars, even the work of a poet. The pages must be gilt-edged! Still, *you* look opulent. And I've asked Crombie to drop in. There's a rich atmosphere about him, the result of his unpaid bills." He led the way through a doorway and stood back at the foot of the stairs. "Take a deep breath. It's three flights up, and there may be rat-holes. I'm not sure."

She obeyed, amused. His Irish voice drifted over her left shoulder as he followed in her wake.

"Don't hurry. They aren't asked until five o'clock, and I've finished the dusting. 'Alone, I did it.' Almost as bad as moving house! Isn't it an awful thought that Nature abhors a vacuum and that, however much you may destroy, it turns up in another shape? '*Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?*' Here we are. Hullo, Crombie!"

A man was leaning against the door surveying them with a lazy smile. The face seemed vaguely familiar to Sheila with its deep blue eyes under prominent brows, smooth dark hair, and air of mischief: a sleepy mischief that matched his voice as he replied to his friend's greeting.

"Well, you're a nice host!" The words were drawled, but a faint burr, the barely perceptible touch of the North, tipped them with an odd crispness and awoke a slumbering memory.

Now she knew! This was the man who years ago had caught her "trespassing" at Crosskeys. Crombie? Of course, that was the name.

Pat introduced the pair and led them into his chambers; dark old rooms with panelled walls, rather shabby yet pleasantly cool, and comforting to the eyes. For the few pieces of furniture had been chosen with care and the colouring toned with the mellow light. Over all lay the glamour of time.

"Now, if you don't mind talking to Crombie," their host suggested casually, "I'll go and see about the tea." He had steered Sheila to a seat in the deep walls under the window. "You happy there?"

"Quite happy."

Pat withdrew, satisfied.

"You couldn't very well say that you weren't," Crombie drawled, "could you?" He stretched out a long arm for a cushion and tucked it neatly between her shoulders and the hard wall. "Is that better?" She nodded her thanks. "I'm rather nervous, left in charge," he explained lazily. "If you drift away before Pat comes back he'll certainly be blaming me."

"I shan't go before my tea. So you may set your mind at rest." Sheila smiled, scrutinizing the man beside her from under her lashes. She was full of silent amusement, remembering how they had last met.

He was well-built and carefully-dressed, with just a hint of dandyism in the cut of his braided coat, across which, on a fine cord, was suspended a monocle.

He played with it as he talked.

"You're fond of the 'catch' meal? The expression's borrowed from a book I've been studying, on agriculture. 'Catch crops' are the husbandman's chosen economy." His solemn voice was caught up by an echo in the long room that mocked it from some secret source and emphasized the vibrating "r's." "You plant them between sterner products, such as rows of beans, as a little gamble. They come up, or they don't. It all depends on whether there's room. The

same thing, it seems to me, applies to tea—a 'catch' meal, wedged in between lunch and dinner, the serious functions of the day." He might have been a lecturer, so grave was his expression.

"Quite a good name for it," Sheila agreed politely. "You're interested in agriculture?"

"Not *enormously*." He caught her eye and laughed outright. The sound was so infectious that she joined in against her will. "It's like this." He became confidential. "I've been reading a friend's book. Had to! There was no escape. A small price, after all, to pay for a week's shooting. And it *did* please him, poor old chap! He's never done anything all his life, and now he's blossomed out as an author—a 'catch crop' in Literature. He's simply bursting with importance. An authority — that's what counts! He sees himself laying down laws that will harness Nature to his chariot."

"You don't write yourself?" she suggested.

"No. Do you?" He looked surprised.

She shook her head, watching the play of his hands, restless about the eyeglass. They were strong and supple, the wrist well turned, curiously reminiscent of Sandy's.

"Though I've just come from an authors' club." She filled up the little pause. "My only efforts in that direction have been so far in correcting mistakes in my husband's speeches for the papers. So I can't lay claim to much distinction."

She might have mentioned truthfully her long labours over her own; but she never obtruded her Suffrage work, unless she foresaw a likely adherent.

Crombie looked interested.

"Your husband is a politician? I don't think I caugh your name."

"Antrobus," she said distinctly.

"The member for the X division? Yes, of course." But the puzzled expression still remained on his face. He went on cautiously, "I'm sure I've met you somewhere before. Do you happen to know the Merribys?"

"Yes. They are old friends of Philip's." Her voice was demure. Should she tell him?

"Then perhaps I've seen you at their parties. I have a memory for faces which is rather disconcerting at times."

He fixed his eye-glass in his eye and deliberately gazed at her. There was something provocative in the look, yet it was void of disrespect. It aroused in her the effect of a challenge, and she gave way to a mischievous impulse.

"You think you'll know me next time?"

Crombie shifted in his corner. With a slight contraction of his face, he let the monocle fall on its cord.

"I'm not going to apologize. I'm really short-sighted, and I'm sure that I've met you somewhere, years ago—talked to you. It's tantalizing." He stared across the shadowy room. "Unluckily, you don't remember."

Sheila risked the experiment.

"Don't be too sure of that! The trouble is that the setting's wrong. There should be snow. And a green-house, built out on the lawn. I think it's called a Winter Garden. There's a 'nice little carpet with a fringe'"—she saw him start—"but you mustn't drop ashes on it. Mr. Blundell's particular. That's why he should erect a board to keep off trespassers."

She had finished the speech rather breathlessly, watching the man's changing face. From a look of utter bewilderment it passed to a dawning comprehension. The deep blue eyes lit with fun; he leaned across the cushioned seat holding back the words on his lips until the end of her description.

"How splendid! You're the girl on the wall! I should think I do remember it." His drawl was gone; something boyish and charming in his sudden excitement struck Sheila forcibly. "I can even tell you what you wore. A little grey fur cap with violets stuck on one side, and brogued shoes with leather fringes. How they doubled across that yard whilst I manfully held the gate! Old Blundell was on the qui vive. I had to use all my wits to drag him back to the house. As soon as I'd settled him in his study I followed your trail, but you had gone." He laughed. "You said you lived in

London, and I told you then we should meet! Well, I was right, after all. When did you recognize me?"

"When you spoke. I'd forgotten your name."

"You might have enlightened me earlier."

"I was too deeply absorbed in your views on agricultural improvements."

"Ha, ha!"

His laugh rang out, to be checked by the sudden entry of Pat, very flurried, teapot in hand. He dashed it down on the tray and hurried across to the door.

"I say, you two, they're coming now. I saw them out of the other window. Those beastly cakes have all trickled."

Sheila's eyes sought Crombie's. In the look of amused comprehension between them was sown the seeds of their friendship.

"Do you know the Spinks?" she asked softly.

"I *do*! Look here, we must save Pat. It's a most forlorn adventure. But you'll see for yourself." He spoke in a whisper. "We're always conspiring, aren't we? But you won't give me the slip this time. Promise?" His face was eager.

"I make no rash undertaking." She thought he was going a little too fast in presuming upon her connivance. Again he reminded her of Sandy.

Her voice had been cool, and he drew back. When he spoke again it was with his old drawl.

"Well, anyhow, I'm glad we've met."

With the feminine instinct, as he retreated she became anxious to hold his interest.

"Poor Pat! We must do our best."

Crombie smiled to himself.

. . . . . .

It was with a feeling of relief that Sheila escaped from the Spinks and found herself, later on, bowling along in a hansom with Crombie. He had volunteered to see her home, and with the memory of her snub, slight but effective, earlier, she had accepted his explanation that her house lay on the way to his club. An old excuse that involves many a complicated journey,

and brings financial assistance to cabmen, who look on lovers as their prey.

Not that Crombie could be included in the latter category, but he found in Sheila a certain freshness unusual among London women. He felt he should like to know her better. Therefore he talked of Pat, a very useful link between them.

"She's so brazenly young, is Mrs. Spink. She suggests all sorts of forgotten joys," he drawled, as they slid down the greasy roads. "Kiss-in-the-ring and Maypole Maidens. Or the Lady with Bells on her Fingers and Toes." He glanced quickly at Sheila's lap, where her hands were folded together on the top of a small lizard-skin bag. "I can't stand the perpetual jingle of those gold objects she carries about, like a rifled dressing-case. Though I daresay she finds them useful." He smiled rather wickedly.

For Mrs. Spink was decidedly meretricious in appearance. Nature alone predominated in the too full bust and the little pouches under her skilfully pencilled eyes that no art could conceal.

"The daughter will grow just the same." Sheila's voice was full of disgust. "At present she's like a tame white rabbit, fluffy and soft and utterly brainless. She looks at Pat with adoring eyes and tells him she *loves* poems. And she struggles with a hopeless accent. Where ever do they come from?"

"Heaven knows! I think they live in a select part of Hampstead. But Mrs. Spink's out to win. Whilst Doris sighs and blushes, she plays the part of the stern parent and insists on Pat's lack of means. But she knows, too, that he has prospects from relations, apart from his profession. He's better born. That's his attraction. Mrs. Spink has social ambitions. Once they're married she'll rule the house—live with them probably! Pat's lost in a vague dream. He won't listen to rhyme or reason."

"Not even to rhyme?" Sheila smiled. "I wonder if Sandy knows."

Crombie started. The slight action annoyed Sheila. She thought that he was surprised by her allusion to Hinkson as a

possible intermediary. They had met more than once since her marriage, but only in a formal manner. She resented the feeling that his name was still coupled with her own.

Crombie instinctively guessed her thoughts.

"I'm 'Sandy,' too, you know. That's why I jumped like that." He laughed lightly to cover the words. "I've a better right to it than Hinkson. I was christened Alexander. But then I've such a lot of nicknames. Most of my friends call me Alec." They were held up in Piccadilly by a block in the traffic at Bond Street. "There go the Merribys. If one speaks of people, they're sure to appear. The youngest girl's very pretty. Don't you think so? That wonderful red hair."

"Yes. She's like a Burne-Jones picture. Have you been to the Grosvenor Gallery?"

"Not yet. Have you?"

She shook her head.

"I only returned to town to-day."

"Would you care to come with me one morning?" He threw it out carelessly, watching the people on the pavement and raising his hat to another acquaintance. As she did not answer him at once he said lightly, "Do pictures bore you? I tell you what we might do. Just look in for a few minutes and then go on to lunch in Soho. You were talking about the sudden craze for a mild dose of Bohemia in the shape of a cheap meal." He smiled. "Do let me give you one. I know a rather nice little place where the forks are clean—that's a great pull!—and I don't think they poison you. Will you risk it? It's quite amusing."

"Thanks very much." She was undecided. The novelty—as it then was—appealed to her, and she liked Crombie. Why not? Philip was out to lunch, as a rule, so it would not upset her plans.

"Then I'll ring you up one fine morning, on the chance," her new friend persisted. "Unless you'd rather go to Prince's?"

"Oh no. It wouldn't be half such fun." She cut this short decisively. She did not want a slight acquaintance to

launch out into expense. She had always had an instinctive shrinking from the habit of many married women who accept attentions from stray men. "What is the name of your pet haunt?"

"The *Pomme d'Or*. It's run by a man who was once the *chef* of a big hotel. The company is not select; cosmopolitan, of course, but that's a part of the amusement. Personally, I rather enjoy hearing the chatter of foreign tongues. It carries me back to days abroad. And they do seem to enjoy themselves—less self-conscious than English people."

The hansom moved on again, passing a station omnibus piled up with heavy luggage. People were swarming back to town. Soon, too soon, life would become a tangle of conflicting engagements. Sheila gave a little sigh.

"Tired?" Crombie's voice was gentle.

"No." She confessed her passing thought.

"But you like life? I'm sure of that. You look so full of vitality."

"I like my liberty too," she explained. "And I think one risks losing it in a round of social efforts. One never has any time to think. What is worse, no time for work."

"But *you* don't work?" His eyes twinkled.

"Don't I!" Her head went up. A little flush rose to her cheeks. Crombie watched her approvingly. How pretty she was in her simple fashion; so healthy, yet dainty too. Rare—that was the word for her—and wholly unconscious of her charm.

"You make me very inquisitive. Do you go in for Pekingese or collect blue china?"

He had his reward. She turned her head with a little flash of temper.

"I thought you more discriminating."

"Then perhaps you're a champion of Woman's Rights?"

"I am." She gave a teasing laugh, for Crombie's eyeglass had clattered down. He looked thoroughly taken aback.

"Good heavens!" He stared at her, amazed. "A Suffragette! Do you break windows?"

She frowned.

"I can't think why people always expect that as the result of an interest in the cause. I might as well ask if you sleep in your wig, because you are a barrister."

"I have done. In a dull case." He refused to be snubbed. "Honestly now, do you approve of all that sort of thing?"

"I approve of anything that will stir public opinion out of its groove. Oh!" She clutched his arm in a panic. The hansom had grazed the wheels of a bus in its efforts to avoid a van that had pulled up without warning. The horse, checked by the sudden jar on the greasy slope, slid, stumbled, and, after one tense moment, recovered its equilibrium.

"That's all right," said Crombie gaily. But he knew it had been a near shave. He glanced at her. Except for her first instinctive movement, she had not blenched. The colour was still warm in her cheeks, a faint smile played on her lips.

"You asked for that!" He risked the reproof. "Personally, I'm inclined to think that the groove is safer. But then, you see, I'm all for an easy life."

She paid him not the slightest attention. She was leaning forward, her eyes on the horse.

"I hope he didn't cut his knees. Isn't he going a trifle lame?"

Crombie chuckled.

"I don't think so. You're fond of horses? Do you ride?"

"Rather." Satisfied that all was well, she settled back in her corner. "But not in London. I can't afford it." There was regret in her voice.

"Well, it isn't much fun in the Park." He wondered if she were well off. She lived in Mayfair, and her dress held the stamp of a good house. There were fine pearls in her ears, and her boots were flawless—a sound test of finance in an Englishwoman, who prefers to spend more superfluous cash on her general appearance than in details, unlike her Gallic sister.

A little silence fell between them. Sheila became aware of it as they approached Grosvenor Square.

"Well, we've settled nothing about Pat. I think I shall have to hunt up some girl of a different type and try the effect of a contrast. Is he fond of dancing? I can't remember."

"I'm afraid not."

"What a pity!" They halted before the narrow house. Crombie sprang down and helped her out. "Will you come in?"

"No, thanks. I have to meet a man at the club." He watched her produce her latchkey in a business-like fashion and open the door. Then she turned, fresh and smiling.

"So nice of you to see me home. I suppose——" She was fingering her purse.

"No, no——" he checked her at once. "I shall take the hansom on. You won't forget that you've promised to come to the *Pomme d'Or*," he reminded her.

"You're not afraid to be seen about in the company of a Suffragette?" She raised mischievous eyes to his and was conscious of a slight shock. For Crombie's gaze held hers with a certain virile magnetism as though he imposed his will on her. She resented it, yet was helpless for a fleeting moment that barely counted.

It was a new experience, and it passed as swiftly as it came. She heard his merry:

"I think I'll risk it!" Then, in a graver voice, "I shall look forward to our lunch. It's very good of you to come. Are you busy at the end of the week? If not, I'll ring up."

"Do. I've no engagements at present." She added smoothly, "My husband returns on Wednesday. You must come and meet him."

"Thanks. I should like to. Good-bye." He raised his hat and watched her close the little green door before he gave further directions to the driver. Then, with his foot on the step, "The Temple," he said blandly.

The man smiled and whipped up his horse.

. . . . . .

As she went up the grim old stairs it seemed to Sheila that

the spell of disapproval lingering there had lifted a little. Her light step echoed briskly across the landing, and she paused to straighten the fatal picture susceptible to the draught, an engraving, cherished by her husband, of an early-Victorian politician.

"You're very ugly," Sheila decided. "And you always look in a bad temper, but Philip loves you—even your whiskers! So why behave in this skittish fashion? I'm sure you've lived a straight life, been tyrannical to yourself and others, yet your old age is a reproach. One might almost think that you drank on the sly!"

She pulled off her gloves and sought the tool drawer. Then, with the tacks in her hand, came back to the offender.

"You're going to be beaten by a woman. I hope you'll enjoy it!" She lifted the hammer. "*There!*" She drove the nails home. The picture hung, immovable.

The next task she set herself was an overhauling of her wardrobe, aware of the changing seasons. But even this could not depress her, though the state of her evening dresses, as they emerged from their tissue paper, left much to be desired. It meant at least two new gowns and a good many renovations.

"I wonder if Clotilde has a model which would fit me? To wear at once. I think I'll go and ring her up." She rose from her knees by the open drawer. "If I went round first thing to-morrow I might get it home for my birthday dinner." Her eyes brightened at the thought.

The telephone stood in the boudoir. A foreign voice answered her call. Yes. Madame Clotilde was coming.

Sheila waited until she heard the well-known accents, the *voix trainante* of the great *couturière*, with its shrill nuance of pleased surprise. For Sheila was a favourite client. She looked well, and she paid promptly, the sure road to Clotilde's heart.

Naturally the latter had the "very thing" that was required. She was just back from a visit to Paris with some costumes that were "*ravissantes*" and a little model suitable in a new

shade of blue—a "*demi-toilette.*" With "Madame's eyes" it would be perfect, and "Madame's skin"! It would not suit "*every* lady, *bien sûr*," but Madame was so "fortunate in her colouring."

The price? Well, that could be arranged after Madame had tried it on. Sheila frowned. She knew Clotilde. But there was no harm in seeing it.

"*A demain, donc? Vers dix heures.*" She rang off, fairly contented. And suddenly she laughed aloud. "If Clotilde knew that the dress was to grace a quiet dinner at home with Philip, she would consider it utterly wasted!" This was her merry thought. "I mustn't let this out to-morrow or I shan't get it home in time."

She dined in solitary state and settled down with a magazine on the sofa in the boudoir. But she turned the pages absently. For her mind drifted. She felt happy. The day had been most amusing in an unexpected fashion. Dear old Magda. And then Pat, with his love affair and those terrible Spinks! Yet, even there she became indulgent. The girl might improve on acquaintance, and women were very adaptable. The mother was certainly a trial; "brazenly young," as Crombie had said. Her thoughts flew off at a tangent to the lunch at the *Pomme d'Or*, with a faint mistrust, indefinable, of the man who was to be her host. Why had she agreed to go? She could have easily satisfied her curiosity anent this latest fashionable whim, a cheap meal in Soho, with some old friends or another woman.

It had taken her by surprise, and she had been in the mood for adventure. The stir of life in the streets, after the quiet of the country, and the sense of belonging to the crowd had stirred in her a different feeling to the one on her first return to town. She was part of this throbbing pulse of England, by right of her long residence and her husband's hard-won position.

All the same—she frowned slightly—it was unlike her usual habit to accept Crombie's invitation, on the chance acquaintanceship of a day. She rarely went out with men alone. Her

mother had disapproved of the fashion and had strictly forbidden it in her girlhood. It usually meant a *partie carrée.* Well, she could always get out of it by pleading some fresh engagement. If he wanted to know her, he could call in the orthodox way, or come to lunch one Sunday and meet Philip.

But even as she decided this, her mind wavered. Her attitude seemed rather prudish, viewed from a modern standpoint. And Crombie was certainly amusing. She liked that lazy drawl of his and the northern voice that reminded her at odd moments of her father; also the way that his speech quickened when he was stung by excitement. Which was the real man? The rather boyish personality who had hailed her as "the girl on the wall," or the leisurely individual who had asked if she went in for "blue chinah"?

They seemed to lie oceans apart. And between them stood yet another Crombie, more virile and less assuring, the man who had stared down into her eyes on the threshold of Philip's house. She tried to dismiss this as a figment conjured up by magination. Short-sighted people often gazed with an unconscious fixity. Yet she knew in the depths of her heart that up to that fleeting instant she had felt attracted to the man. They might have become good friends.

On she went with her ruthless logic. Then, why, if the notion were absurd—some effect of the light on dark blue eyes that missed the focus of his eyeglass—should she draw back from further acquaintance, like a silly schoolgirl? How Magda would laugh! A married woman, to feel afraid of that vague thing known as mesmerism—or animal magnetism' whichever you chose to call it—a woman so settled in her views, in her work and duty to her husband.

"Ridiculous!" The word jumped out, rather surprising in the silence. And immediately the little clock on the mantelpiece chimed the half-hour.

"Ting!"

The sharp silvery note brought her back to the present. She glanced up at the pretty toy, a wedding gift to her mother,

with its Watteau figures on either side—a girl, with a mask in her hand, smiling behind it at her lover, his three-cornered hat pressed to his heart, in his attitude, adoration—and, above it, her eyes caught the gleam of "The Empty Road" straining up under purple clouds to the sky. The picture held her, for a moment, with the old magic, and she smiled. No lounging form by the edge of the lonely upward sweep of down marred the perfect harmony. It was all hers, unexplored. It gave her the old sense of possession. With a little friendly nod to the sketch, she passed, yawning, into her bedroom.

But although she could dismiss Crombie so indifferently during the hours of reason, in her sleep it was another matter. For then subconscious powers were at work. He had slipped from her mind long before her cheek pressed the cool pillow. Yet he came back in the land of dreams.

She found herself among green fields with long, lush grass swayed by the winds, a delicious lightness in her limbs, her face upturned to a rosy dawn. Bare-footed, she could feel the cool freshness of the earth, the breeze that swept across the space in little ripples stirring the flowers, starry among the pointed blades; and, with the utter lack of surprise that seems to be a feature of dreams, she saw that it was not a meadow, but the sea itself, with dancing waves that broke on the sands at her feet—an instantaneous and dazzling change.

Furthermore, she was not alone. A man was standing by her side, dark-headed, content and silent. Shining rocks lay on her right and a little grey pier that jutted out where fishermen bent over a boat, picturesque in their tarpaulins. Together, she and that other Sandy watched them put out to sea into the rosy flush of the dawn, up a path of golden light that led to the far horizon. A voice whispered, like a sigh, "*The barque of Friendship*," and died away. Shading her eyes, she followed the boat with an anxious gaze. It seemed to her that all hung on this moment—some breathless revelation.

It sailed away—and away—and away. . . .

Pain and disillusion seized her.

"It's gone!" She turned to her companion, seeking his sympathy. But on his face was no answering sadness; he looked eager and triumphant. In his deep blue eyes was a silent question; his hand went out with a masterful gesture and closed firmly round her arm.

The grip of the strong fingers hurt, and she tried vainly to escape. But here the curious paralysis that is born of nightmare numbed her limbs and froze the protest on her lips. He was drawing her closer and closer to him.

Struggling against the spell that held her, with a last effort she cried aloud:

"I won't! *I won't!* It's so unfair!" and awoke, quivering, deathly cold.

The moonlight was streaming through the window, outlining every object. Still frightened and confused, in that midway land between deep sleep and full consciousness, she slipped from her bed and crossed the room, feeling ever the lingering pain of that passionate grasp on her arm. She thrust up the flimsy sleeve before the glass and examined the place in a childish dread. Had it left a mark?

The flesh was white and untroubled. Only then did she awake—in the full meaning of the word. She caught sight of herself in the mirror and gave a shaky little laugh.

"Well!" She tossed back her hair, which clung to her forehead, damp with fright. "It's quite time that Philip came home, when I take to walking in my sleep! I've never done such a thing before." She frowned, ashamed of her sudden panic.

But she felt curiously exhausted. She sat down on the foot of the bed, trying to shake off the effect of the vivid dream and her bruised arm.

"I must have been lying on it," she thought, "and the moon was shining on my face. I ought to have pulled down the blinds."

She glanced at her watch. To her surprise, the hands were close on the midnight hour. She had believed it to be later, but in the air was that strange tension which hovers over the

new day's birth, as though the earth lay listening for the word of the Creator. Sheila's ears were suddenly strained. It seemed to her that a light step crossed the polished floor in the boudoir, tap-tapping, with pointed heels ; a board creaked, then silence. Ashamed of the sudden beat of her heart, she strode across the moonlit room and threw the door wide open. Nothing was there save the shadowy shapes of the familiar furniture. Yet out of the stillness, far away, there came a faint thin ripple of sound, fluid and sweet, suggesting laughter—the mockery of the old house.

Sheila shivered, holding her breath.

"I really believe this place is haunted! I never liked it from the first. I'm sure that evil people have lived here, leaving the stain of their sins behind. But I'm not going to let them see I'm frightened. They don't know the modern woman or they wouldn't play these silly tricks." Deliberately she steadied her nerves. "And as to my dream of Crombie, and 'the barque of Friendship,' it's too absurd! A punishment for imagining things that have never happened. Or else"—she smiled—"that second helping of lobster salad!"

With this she turned, resisting the impulse to look back over her shoulder, drew down the blinds, and went to bed. Ten minutes later she was asleep.

CHAPTER XIV

THE blue dress came home in time. Clotilde had added a dainty scarf of dull gold net and a narrow wreath of laurel leaves with metallic tips which Sheila bound about her hair. Little gold shoes completed the picture, and Philip had stooped to compliments, a most unusual proceeding with him. The play, too, had proved a success, and her husband had laughed heartily.

They discussed the plot on their way home, their shoulders touching in the cab, Sheila's hand tucked through his arm in a spirit of happy comradeship. He seemed more human, his wife thought, more like the man who had aroused her interest at their first meeting; above all, nearer in years, one of her own generation.

Whilst he paid the cabman, she paused, for a moment, to gather up the late letters. Three of them were addressed to Philip and she hid them under her opera cloak. Business should not interfere with this red-letter evening.

Peeping over the banisters she saw him glance at the empty salver and follow briskly in her wake.

"I told the servants not to sit up," she informed him when he reached the landing. "We're going to have supper in my boudoir."

"Supper?" He raised his brows.

"Of course! On a gala night." She smiled, her eyes very bright. "Come and see. It's a surprise! I thought it would be cosier than going on to the Savoy."

He had thrown out this suggestion half-heartedly in the theatre. The dinner had been a light affair, and the thought of the food was stimulating. He welcomed the innovation.

"Capital!" He rubbed his hands, which gave out the irritable sound of hard dry skin, a habit of his which Sheila disliked, but at this moment she could afford to laugh at it. She was in a very happy mood. She saw him glance up at the picture of the worthy politician, primly straight in line with the others.

"He's quite cured. *I* did it." A dimple played in the curve of her cheek. "Observe the tacks on either side. There's a dutiful wife for you!"

Antrobus looked pleased.

"Very thoughtful. Thank you, my dear. I must say I like things tidy."

"No!" Her laugh rang out. "I never should have dreamt that." Off she went up the further flight. "I'm going to warm the soup," she cried. "Come up when you're ready."

But she passed first into her bedroom for a critical glance at herself, pinned back a rebellious curl, and discarded the gold scarf together with her theatre coat. With a touch of vanity she approved the lines of her smooth neck and shoulders, whiter by contrast with her cheeks, in which a flush of excitement lingered. She looked glowing, full of life, yet her slenderness gave her the grace of youth. She peeled off her long gloves and bestowed on her nails a last polish, ruefully aware that her hands were still brown from exposure in Ireland.

"But Philip won't notice that. Not if the supper's good! And I really feel rather nice, thanks to Clotilde." She nodded gaily to her reflection in the glass. "Surely——" She left the thought unfinished.

The boudoir was bright with flowering plants. Drawn up to the sofa was a table, with a lace-edged cloth, laid for two round a Worcester bowl filled with roses that scented the air with a last fond fragrance of the summer. She looked at the dishes anxiously and her face lightened. Cook had succeeded.

A "catch" meal? She remembered Crombie's pet expression and then her dream. It seemed more than ever absurd to-night. "Well, old ghosts," she looked at the walls with a faint grimace, "this should suit you. A deliberate plot to ensnare a husband!"

She lit the little silver lamp under the chafing-dish, put on the soup and watched the steam begin to rise, then bubbles form, and finally poured it into the cups.

Philip's deliberate step sounded on the landing beyond and she called gaily, "*Monsieur est servi!*" as he entered, neat and dapper, thin-lipped, with a slight line between his brows. The reason for this was soon apparent.

"You haven't seen any letters for me? I looked for them in my study."

She hesitated.

"There were a few. I brought them up with my own. But do let's have supper first."

Their eyes met, hers pleading. He gave in with an air of indulgence.

"Very well—as you like. But where are they?"

"In my bedroom."

They settled down to the table. She watched him lift the spoon to his lips, waiting for his exclamation.

"Turtle? How extravagant!"

"It's my birthday present, to myself!" Her eyes danced. "And look at this——" She pointed to a gold-necked bottle. "Your favourite brand. The dear old dad sent me a small case this morning. *Now*, aren't you glad we came home to a *tête-à-tête* repast?"

"Decidedly." His voice was polite. "Very kind of your father." He went on thoughtfully, "When the Colstons return to town I want to ask them here to dinner. Sir Frederick's fussy over his wine, so it will come in very useful."

Sheila's happy smile faded. She had looked upon her birthday present as a little addition to the cellar to be reserved for her personal friends. It was so like Philip to commandeer it without asking her permission. Still, she would meet him half-way.

"Yes. We might arrange that. What is Lady Colston like?"

"Oh, very pleasant. Rather quiet. But she makes an admirable hostess. Milestones is a charming place, the gardens quite beautiful. I understand that they're her hobby."

"She must need one." She spoke demurely. "Her husband belongs to the public."

"He's a busy man—with a wonderful brain." Philip had missed the grain of mischief dormant in his wife's speech. "I must say I enjoyed my visit. We found a good deal in common."

"Including quiet wives," laughed Sheila. She watched him pour out the sparkling wine and return to his chair; then she raised her glass. "To *my* successful politician!" She smiled at him over the rim.

"Thanks. But I should drink to you. You are the heroine of the day. What shall I wish you?" His eyes were kind.

"Something wonderful," she said. "The most wonderful thing to a woman. Can't you guess?"

He looked puzzled. There had been a thrill in her voice, a shy intention in the glance she threw across the dainty table.

"Of course!" He smiled. "You mean the Vote. How dense of me!"

To his surprise he saw quick anger and disappointment pass over her mobile face. With a little effort she laughed it off.

"We'll leave it at that, for the present. Now, won't you have some *mousse de jambon*? Or would you prefer the chicken salad? And do fill up your glass, Philip."

He obeyed her, helping himself carefully to the more solid proposition, picking out the heart of the lettuce with a secret greediness. Then he remembered his wife.

"What are you going to have, my dear?"

"Oh, I'll see to myself," she answered lightly. "These flowers came from the Windmill Farm. They have such a pretty garden. Tim gathered them with the dew on. That's why they've lasted so well. The Craiks are a very happy couple—simply devoted to each other—and they've got the dearest little child. With red hair, so quaint!" She paused. "It made me envious."

"But you wouldn't like to live in the country?" Again he had missed her train of thought. "You'd find it dull after London."

"I don't think so." She stifled a sigh. "I get so tired of all the fuss of entertaining crowds of people and having so few *real* friends. One hasn't time. That's the trouble. I'm growing domestic in my old age, and—I see so little of my husband."

The half-laugh that finished the speech took the sting out of it, but Philip frowned. He always resented an encroachment on his liberty. Absently he straightened the knife and fork on his plate and picked up a crumb.

"I thought you understood, my dear. It's only my work that calls me away. I never go out like other men to bachelor parties for mere pleasure. I don't think that I deserve any reproaches on the score of neglecting my wife." He was slightly pompous. "But to be a successful man these days one can't afford to overlook a single opportunity of meeting people who may be useful."

The hated phrase jarred on her, but she showed no signs of the fact.

"I know. You're a slave to your work. All the same I'm sometimes lonely. It isn't as if I had a child."

Again he caught an undercurrent of feeling in her clear voice. He looked up with nervous attention.

"I didn't think you cared for one?" Before she could answer, he temporized. "Well, my dear, there's plenty of time. We've only been married two years."

"Nearly three!" She caught him up.

"Really? I hadn't counted. There's no room for a nursery here, is there?" He avoided her gaze. "But if that's your idea, and of course it's right and natural"—he waved his hand in a way she had learnt to connect with his speeches—"we shall have to look out for a larger house." He drummed with his fingers on the table. "It wouldn't be in Mayfair. The rents are too exorbitant. It might even mean the suburbs—with a good deal of economy. I'm not very fond of children myself. At my age—you understand? By the time my son had grown up I should be an old man." He found a more personal objection from Sheila's point of

view, and seized upon it eagerly. "It would be a great tie to you. You would have to give up your Suffrage work."

"I shouldn't care!" It sounded defiant.

"Well, well——" He refilled his glass. "We must see. You've taken me by surprise. I'm not sure that I approve of your stolen visit to the Craiks. It seems to have unsettled you."

This was obviously meant for a joke, for his thin lips curved in a smile and the lamplight caught at a gold filling in one of his upper teeth.

"It has certainly shown me——" Sheila began. Then she checked the impetuous words, aware of a lack of wisdom. The simple love of the Craiks would not appeal to Antrobus, and she risked annoying him through persistence. She had laid her cards on the table. The next move should be his. "I think I'll see about the coffee."

As she passed her husband's chair she gave him a sidelong glance. He was staring ahead, wrapped in thought. She paused. He became aware of her nearness.

"Yes?"

"I didn't speak," she said. "But I'll give you a penny for your thoughts."

"I was wondering whom we'd ask to meet the Colstons," he answered slowly.

She moved on with a shrug of her shoulders.

"You know best." Her voice was flat.

"It's difficult, for many reasons." He passed a hand over his forehead. "And I feel tired and stupid to-night."

"Then why think of it yet?" she asked. "A cup of coffee will do you good. The theatre was rather hot." She watched the water boil up through the little fountain of the machine with its chuckling gurgle, and waited for it to fill the receiver.

In due course it was ready. She came back with the tray and the dainty Viennese cups in their pierced silver holders—another gift from her father—and placed it on a high stool.

"Now, let's get rid of this table and then we can both use the sofa. Pull!" She smiled up into his face. "That gives us more room. Tuck that cushion behind your back."

She settled down by his side. "If you're good you shall smoke a cigar to-night—against rules!"

He shook his head.

"No, not in here, thanks. I'll have one when I go downstairs."

"*Do.*"

"It's too near your bedroom."

His unusual thoughtfulness touched her.

"I don't mind." She laid her hand on his for a moment. He made no response and she withdrew it rather quickly. "Well, then, a cigarette? I must thank you for a happy evening. I thoroughly enjoyed that play. Now, say you liked my supper?"

She spoke eagerly and he smiled. What a child she was! In some ways the thought was a reassuring one.

"A feast of the gods." He bowed to her. "And served by a goddess. Will that do?"

Her eyes searched his wistfully.

"I believe you're a little fond of me."

"My dear!" He patted her bare arm, a rare caress. "You know I am. And you're looking very pretty to-night. I like that dress. Blue suits you."

Her face softened. Hope returned. Cara had said, "Make love to him." Well, she would try! It was uphill work.

"I got it for you. In *such* a hurry! Luckily there was little to alter, but it only just came home in time. I wanted you to feel proud of me."

"A great success." He spoke suavely. "And now, where have you hidden my letters?"

"No—you shan't have them yet!" She laughed at him courageously. "I'm not going to run the risk of being thrown over for your work! Not just yet, anyhow. It's not fair on my birthday. They can wait. I want to talk."

She leaned across him to the stool to replace her empty coffee-cup.

"Allow me." He took it from her with his inevitable politeness.

The little formality constrained her. She searched her brains for some topic congenial to him and could find none. They had so few tastes in common beyond the vetoed subject of work.

Philip sat there, still abstracted. A wild desire to laugh seized her. Through the open door of her bedroom she could see her dressing-gown laid out over a chair, with her slippers beneath, dainty *mules* in padded satin, and the light on the tortoise-shell brushes. The scene, with the dimly-lit boudoir, was as intimate as one drawn from a French play; the fancy struck her. Only the principal actor was missing; this solemn husband was out of place. It wanted youth, not middle age.

The Dresden clock chimed the hour. Behind her mask the china figure coquetted with her cavalier, one ruffled hand pressed to his heart. The old house was strangely still. It seemed to be waiting, like Sheila herself, urging her on to some reckless folly.

Antrobus stirred. Carefully, he extinguished the end of his cigarette in the ash-tray by his side. Then he looked up and caught her eye.

"Philip?" She leaned towards him. "Don't you think that it would be nice——" Courage failed her. She broke off and added, at random, "It's getting late."

"Yes, quite time for bed."

He made a movement to rise from the sofa. In desperation her hands went up to his shoulders, checking his intention. They stole higher about his neck.

"Don't go—don't go!" She spoke in a breathless whisper, tense with the effort that it cost her. "I get so frightened here alone. I know it's silly—I can't help it! But the place creaks so at night. I lie there, listening. And I dream——" Aware that his shoulders stiffened she hurried on. "It's so —lonely. And—and—I miss you, Philip." Carried away by her own words, she strained up to his cold face and kissed him, her warm young lips on his.

She felt him respond half-heartedly; his hands closed on her bare arms. He held her a little way from him, studying her flushed face.

"Why, my dear," his eyes were twinkling, "I believe you're making love to me!"

It was said with a complacency that was utterly devoid of passion and unaware of offence. But the sorry jest held a ring of truth in Sheila's ears that pierced her guard. Her pride was wounded mortally. She wrenched her arms out of his grasp. Tears of anger rose to her eyes; of intense disgust and mortification. She stood there, shaking from head to foot.

"You're mistaken." She found her voice at last. "I'll get your letters." The anticlimax, even in that bitter moment, touched a cynical vein in her. "You'll be happy then!" She was gone.

Taken aback by this swift change, Philip stared after the flying figure. He felt annoyed and yet relieved. Why was she suddenly in a temper? He had done nothing to provoke it. Women were variable creatures.

He rose to his feet and retrieved a coffee-spoon from the carpet, dislodged by Sheila's brusque movement. Her skirt had brushed the tray in passing. He examined the pretty trifle, with its featureless apostle.

"Horton's a poor parlour-maid. I believe she's using silver powder, against my wishes. I must tell Sheila to see to this. A rouged leather is all it requires." He hesitated, then replaced the spoon in its saucer, with a frown. "Perhaps I had better overlook it until a happier occasion. She's in a curious mood to-night. Tact—I pride myself on tact. I wish she hadn't gone to the Craiks'." He remembered the old scandal. "I don't like their influence, and women are so easily led." His mind went off at a tangent. "Yet they clamour for a vote and think they can show us how to govern. I begin to doubt the whole affair." For of late he had modified his views, which were opposed to Sir Frederick's. The militant section, becoming daily more rampant in its demonstrations, was offending the public taste. "Hysterical," he summed it up. And here was Sheila wanting a child—a further perplexity. "I've no time to be worried now. Why doesn't she bring me those letters?"

He caught the rustle of her dress and looked up. She was standing before him, her shoulders veiled by the gold scarf, her face white and inscrutable.

"Thank you." He extended his hand.

Nervously, avoiding his touch, she delivered up the correspondence.

"Good night." She jerked it out and, her head high, beat a retreat. He heard the snap of the key turned sharply in the lock.

"Well——!" He stared at the door, amazed. "That's my reward for hurrying home to take her to the theatre."

With a shrug of his thin shoulders he opened the topmost letter. It was from Mr. Travers, and he skimmed the contents anxiously:

"DEAR PHILIP,—I have given the matter on which you write my careful consideration, but I do not intend to enlarge Sheila's already ample allowance.

"I have not approached her on the subject since the suggestion came from yourself, and she did not refer to it whilst with me. I note that you find expenses heavy and am not surprised, considering the rate at which you entertain. But this is your own affair. As regards the alternative you propose, namely, that I should reduce in proportion what I had hoped to leave my daughter in the event of my death, I am surprised that a clever lawyer like yourself should fail to see the obvious weakness of such a course.

"In all human probability Sheila will outlive you, and judging from the past three years you find it impossible to save. Hence it is towards the future that we must direct our energies. I do not intend that she shall suffer in her old age if I can prevent it. Certainly not in order to further your ambitious projects now, which may—or may not—fructify. I consider it a doubtful gamble, from a practical, business-like point of view.

"I am stating the matter very bluntly as I do not want Sheila troubled. She has already, more than once, been put in the somewhat painful position of an intermediary. It does not add to her happiness, and, as you know, she is very loyal.

"I am quite willing to take her away whenever she needs a holiday, and to incur the expense, as I have done this summer

whilst you were golfing at St. Andrews. It is a pleasure to have her with me and very good of you to spare her."

Philip gave a twisted smile, picturing his father-in-law as he penned this polite line. It turned quickly to a scowl when the next paragraph reached his senses.

"But I do not intend to support her. That is her husband's duty.

"One point you have overlooked in a somewhat singular fashion throughout our correspondence, and that is the chance of a family. It is a likely contingency, and in face of it I condemn your practice of living up to your income—and beyond it—in early years. If Sheila becomes a mother she will require a much larger share of her income than she receives at the present for the expenses of a nursery. It would be well to consider this and also the question of education, which would, of course, devolve on you.

"I have no wish to interfere, but I must safeguard my daughter and prevent her generosity running away with her prudence.

"I hope you will take this letter in the spirit in which it is written, but since you have paid me the compliment of speaking your mind quite frankly, I see no need to wrap up my honest views on the subject.

"I wish you heartily all success, both for your own and Sheila's sake."

It was signed formally.

Philip crushed the page in his hand. Then he smoothed it out again, and reread the latter half. He had met his match in Mr. Travers. And here again was the proposition which had startled him already that night. A family? To diminish further the money that his wife had brought him. Certainly not. He would see to that.

Switching off the electric lights, he went down the narrow stairs. His face looked drawn, the lips cruel.

. . . . . .

It was broad daylight when Sheila awoke. By her side was the morning tray, with her tea untouched, but she could not recall the maid entering her room. She rubbed her eyes,

still drowsy, and glanced up at the clock, then to the folds of the blue dress thrown over the back of a chair. In a flash it all came back to her. For the blue dress was a symbol of failure. Her cheeks burned again with the shame that had gripped her through the sleepless hours. To be repulsed by the man she had married, with a mocking phrase, and to realize that she had brought it on herself, had stooped to plead for his love and aroused only covert amusement—it was intolerable!

She hated Philip. The calm affection she had felt for him in early days gave place to a physical repulsion. She shivered as she thought of his hands, and the network of lines round his cold eyes, the thinning hair on his temples; above all, his discoloured lips. Why had she ever listened to Cara, ever dreamed of a reunion? It was a desecration of love.

She had blamed herself, in the night, for the part she had played, but now reason and her naturally healthy outlook showed her that her conscience was clear. Only her personal pride had suffered. For no base impulse had prompted her, but a newborn and wonderful hope. Never down the Empty Road would come the patter of little feet, the welcoming cry of a child's voice. It was over. She had burnt her boats.

Her life would be planned on different lines. If Philip wished to live apart, at least she would have her liberty. He could not expect her to confine herself to his personal schemes of ambition. She would find fresh interests outside; choose those friends who appealed to her, irrespective of his projects.

If all this cost money—a faint smile curved her lips—the money was hers and she would use it. Her father, she knew, would approve. Her loyalty to her husband had hitherto tied her tongue, yet she was not unaware of Mr. Travers' point of view. He was disappointed in her marriage.

With the sunshine streaming across her bed came a sense of reprieve. She was free! She would do her duty, but nothing more. Cara was right. The whole thing was too one-sided. If Philip wished to entertain "useful people," he could pay. There was no claim on her to do so, since he

could not "afford" to have a child. She could have ambitions too, enjoy to the full a social success, with pretty clothes and a pretty house; join a club, throw herself, heart and soul, into her work. Philip had ceased to count. He had snapped the last link between them.

It was good later to breakfast in bed—an unprecedented indulgence—propped against the soft pillows, the paper open by her side, and to read the news tranquilly without Philip's fidgety ways and suggestions anent the housekeeping. She could picture him alone downstairs, harassing the stolid Horton, and choosing the best-cooked kidney or the herring with the soft roe.

"So we're both enjoying ourselves," she decided. She was very much of a rebel that morning.

When she learned from the cook, who came up for the orders, that he was "lunching in," she thought for a moment, wondering if this was meant as a concession. She would not meet him half-way.

"Then lunch for one," she said calmly, and arranged a meal which made the cook retire well satisfied.

"A chump chop is always wholesome," Sheila reflected smilingly. "Philip's fond of economy. I'll lunch at some shop."

But Fate had something better in store.

For as she emerged, fresh and glowing, from her bathroom, the telephone bell rang and she hurried across to the boudoir.

"Yes. Who is it?"

"I'm Crombie. How are you, Mrs. Antrobus? I hope I've not disturbed your slumbers, but I wanted to catch you before you went out. My plans for the week-end are upset. I'm called away to Liverpool." The little drawl with its vibrant "r's" made her smile. "I wondered if by some happy chance you were disengaged to-day and would come out to lunch with me? I hope you haven't forgotten that promise."

"To the *Pomme d'Or*?" She spoke gaily. For it seemed to her that here was a friend at the moment when she needed one.

"Yes—that sounds a little hopeful! I didn't think you'd recall the name." His voice had quickened. "Do come? We'll look in at those pictures first."

"I might manage it." She decided, after a moment's hesitation.

"Good. I've some news for you. Concerning Pat. No, I'm not going to tell you"—as she put in an eager query—"not yet. I shall keep it as a *bonne bouche*, or you mightn't turn up. Would twelve o'clock be too soon? At the Grosvenor Galleries."

"I think half-past would be better. I've some shopping to see to first." Suddenly she realized that she had not thanked her host-to-be. "It's really very kind of you."

"I'm quite selfish," he laughed back. "Wait and see what the lunch is like! You're sure you don't mind roughing it?"

"Do you think that I look like an epicure?"

"Y—es." The drawn-out word amused her. "But I think, too, that you've plenty of courage. Well, I mustn't keep you. *You'll catch cold!*"

The shrewd guess completed her mirth.

"How do you know that I've not been out in the Park already?"

"Ah, you keep in training? I might have remembered. Do you ever climb walls now?" Before she could answer, with a quick "Good-bye" he had rung off.

She went back to complete her dressing, conscious of a faint excitement. She did not analyse the feeling, but the thought passed through her mind that all men were not like Philip—mercifully—and she laughed.

"He's alive—for all his lazy manner. That's what I like about Crombie. The 'other Sandy'?" Her eyes grew thoughtful.

For the first time her conscience pricked her. Had she acted quite fairly towards the lover of her girlhood? What a child she had been at the time—so ruthless in her inexperience. Was it worse to err through love and the warm impulses of youth than to claim a detached negative virtue that froze all

sweetness out of life? Philip posed as a good man. Sandy—she shrugged her shoulders. Life was a perpetual puzzle. Villon's lines returned to her:

"Car jeunesse et adolescence . . .
Ne sont qu'abus et ignorance."

Her thoughts went wandering off to Pat, another poet, doomed to pass his days with a "tame white rabbit." Well, that was why she was going to meet Crombie. "In consultation." But her honesty refused the excuse.

"It's not. I should go, in any case. I mean to make a friend of him. He's amusing—and life's so dull! Why shouldn't I have a friend? Philip could find no objection since he doesn't care for my company."

. . . . . .

Crombie was lounging by the turnstile when she reached the gallery. He threw away his cigarette and came to meet her.

"How are you?"

"Breathless. That's an apology!" For she guessed that she was late. His long hand, warm and supple, full of vitality, held hers. It gave her a feeling of confidence.

"I didn't expect you to be punctual."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. Because it's such an obvious virtue. One associates it with good-nature—the refuge of the plain and worthy." He forestalled her as she drew out her purse. "Please—— You're my guest to-day," and they passed into the long room.

The reflection crossed her mind that had she been with her husband she would have paid, as a matter of course. She paused in front of a sunny landscape.

"I like that. Don't you?"

"Yes." But he was watching her face. "It suits you—the colouring." He saw her stiffen and went on lazily, "I really mean it. There's an open-air atmosphere about you, even in your town clothes. If you walked straight into that green field I shouldn't be in the least surprised. And I know what you'd do next."

"Well?" She was curious.

"You'd look round you cautiously, and having arrived at the conclusion that the artist couldn't paint figures and you had the whole place to yourself——" He checked himself. "I'd better not! But I can see you doing it."

Tantalized, she demanded more. He lowered his voice mysteriously.

"You'd take off your shoes and stockings and paddle down that inviting stream."

She laughed.

"I believe you're right! The pebbles look so nice and smooth." She moved on, with her light step, caught by a dazzling splash of blue.

"Here of course you'd be swimming; diving off that big rock," Crombie resumed. He stuck his monocle into his eye and gazed at the curling waves that broke on the sandy beach, feeling the charm of the picture. "I'm quite sure you're fond of the sea."

"Yes, I love it." She drew in her breath. "I wonder why one lives in London."

"Because it's handy for going away—and nice to return to when one's bored. It's like all bad habits, doubly alluring after a break. Haven't you ever felt its spell?"

"Sometimes." She nodded her head. "But I was born in the depths of the country—Northumberland."

"Then we're neighbours. My home is across the Border. We probably raided each other's cattle in the good old days and were sworn foes. It's pleasant to think we've made it up." He followed her, amused to see the quick way she darted down on any painting that took her fancy, disregarding the catalogue, so certain of what she admired.

He checked her in front of a sombre subject.

"You really ought to look at this. It's been a good deal talked about."

"Then the poor thing deserves a rest." But she halted obediently. "A picture that tells a story? I always find that aggravating, like a portrait of a heroine on the first page of a

novel. I like to imagine things for myself and to find my way without guide-posts."

"Across country? Yes, you would."

She was frowning up at the painting.

"No, it doesn't appeal to me. That old man with the book on his knee—oh, it's the Bible!" She peered closer. "He couldn't possibly see to read, at *his* age, in that light; and there's the kettle boiling over whilst his wife is pretending to sew. It's all pretence, even the dog, which has had a bath for the occasion!"

"But it's just what the public likes. Picturesque poverty. It will probably be reproduced for a Christmas number later on—as a hall-mark of success. Success?" His face grew whimsical. "I wonder if it's ever worth it."

"Do you mean the labour it entails?" Sheila was interested.

He nodded his head.

"Is it life? To drudge on from day to day with the chance of fame in one's old age."

"I'm not sure." She thought of her husband. "It means a perpetual sacrifice of all sorts of simple pleasures."

"That's just it. To what end? I don't want to be remembered when I'm dead by a new generation. I want to live to the fullest now." He looked down into her face. "To enjoy the fact of being alive, and here—with you. That's good enough!"

"Making fun of serious art," Sheila suggested rather quickly.

"If you like. Fun together. I'm a gregarious person, which is partly why I object to work. It's a lonely business, at the best, and since I have enough to live on without starving, or going in rags—thanks to the folly of my tailor—why should I cultivate grey hairs to gain a flattering epitaph? I declare I'd sooner have on my tombstone, 'He was no use and he died, but whilst he lived he enjoyed life,' than 'He sat on the Woolsack and died of spleen.' And if some kind friend would add, 'Did no work, but little harm,' I'd prefer it to the Albert Memorial."

She laughed; he spoke so boyishly.

"But some people love work."

"Then, of course, it becomes a hobby," Crombie pronounced cheerfully. "Like evading the income-tax or collecting rare fossils. But why should I rush in and add to the competition? I'm much too fond of my liberty to turn taskmaster to myself." He gave her a sidelong glance and went on, more seriously, "As a matter of fact, I do work, by fits and starts—more than you'd think. I'm talking nonsense because I feel in a holiday mood. It's your company. I've a genius for exaggeration; you mustn't believe half I say."

"I'm glad you've warned me." Her smile was demure. "I hope that your optimism this morning concerning Pat was not typical."

"Oh no. I honestly believe that our friend is saved—by a miracle!"

"Tell me?" She looked eager.

"Not yet. With the coffee."

They were facing each other, the pictures forgotten, and meeting his direct gaze, in which was a hint of amusement, Sheila felt the subtle challenge. She would *make* him tell her: a conflict of wills.

"Please? I shan't enjoy my lunch with this burden on my mind."

"I can't help that." He shook his head provokingly. "I said I wouldn't. You don't want me to break my word?"

"Yes, I do! I credit you with the 'obvious virtue' of being good-natured."

"*Et tout le reste?*"

She looked confused, remembering his "plain and worthy."

"No. But I ask it—as a favour."

He hesitated, then stood firm. He was sure that she detested weakness in any form. He temporized.

"Favours are rather dangerous things. They imply concessions in return."

She could find no response to this.

"Oh, very well." Her voice was lofty.

For the first time she became absorbed in the pages of the catalogue. She was unreasonably annoyed. It seemed to her that her old power over men was utterly gone. Cara had said that she "snubbed" them, and the thought rankled. She saw herself relegated to the ranks of the background type of married woman, virtuous but hopelessly dull. She glanced furtively at her companion. In silence they studied the crowded walls.

The affair had assumed an absurd importance, due to her over-sensitive state. A sudden brilliant idea struck her. Crombie saw the change in her face.

"Now, what is she up to?" he thought. Aloud, to break the slight restraint, he remarked rather plaintively:

"I'm getting a crick in my neck. Aren't you beginning to feel the same?"

"Does that mean that you're hungry?" She glanced at the watch on her wrist.

"Famished. I didn't like to say so. It sounds so inartistic.

"I think I've had enough myself." A dimple hovered near her mouth.

Crombie watched it suspiciously.

"Then hey for the *Pomme d'Or*!"

They went out and found a hansom.

As he gave the address, she leaned forward from her corner in the cab.

"Could we stop at a post office on the way? I've forgotten something rather important, and I want to use the telephone." Her voice was careless. Crombie assented.

When they reached the door he said laughingly:

"You're not going to disappear by another exit, leaving me stranded, in need of lunch, as a punishment for withholding my news?"

"No." Her smile was mysterious. "I said I'd come, and I keep my word. I'm quite as particular as you are!"

He helped her out, carefully protecting her dress from the wheel. Her hand, for a moment, lay on his arm. It felt like

steel, resisting her pressure, and again she had the fleeting impression of his strength and his youth.

"Don't be long!" He smiled at her.

She laughed back. "You dislike waiting? So do I," and caught his answer, "Not when there's something worth waiting for," before she vanished across the threshold.

He studied her face as she returned, and detected a faint air of triumph. It puzzled him. He set himself to amuse her by a description of his favourite waiter, Alphonse, at the Soho restaurant.

"He's exuberant. He comes from Marseilles—a black-haired, red-cheeked rascal, with a roving eye and a bass voice. When he laughs I forget London and am back again in my old rooms overlooking the *Vieux Port*, with a tangle of shipping and sapphire seas. Do you know Marseilles at all?"

"Only through driving across to the boat, one year when we went to Cairo."

"It deserves a much longer visit. It's a welcoming place. Do you know what I mean? There are towns that chill you when you arrive, houses too. You feel repulsed."

She turned to him inquiringly:

"I thought that was my imagination."

"It's more than that—a form of haunting. Psychists seem to understand it. Are you interested in the occult? I dabble in it occasionally. The theory is that one catches a clue to the past in some subconscious way. One feels it when one meets people—strangers—with whom one is quickly in touch; a sort of fleeting recognition. I felt it with you at Ryan's rooms."

"But then we *had* met before."

"How horribly practical you are! You leave me with no illusions. But I'm so hungry, I'll forgive you. Here's the place!" The hansom had stopped. "Now you'll need all your courage."

He steered her through the narrow entrance into a room already crowded, from which rose the chatter of foreign tongues. Men leaned across the tables, gesticulating, plainly

at ease, their napkins tucked under their chins, and everywhere among the women was a subtle sense of power; a deliberate femininity that invited admiration and received it as its due.

Sheila was curiously conscious of it. What did these Latin women, for the most part plain though cleverly dressed, possess that she herself had missed? They looked so *sure*. She envied them, yet was aware of a feeling strongly akin to repugnance. *Did* men prefer that type?

And suddenly she thought of her father. It was like a breath of clear air blowing across the heated room. She remembered his love for her mother. There could not have been a greater contrast between that serene, beautiful woman, and the powdered, cleverly-dressed class that met her eyes, had she searched the globe. Her mother had made a success of marriage. Her own failure was Philip's fault.

The head waiter greeted her host with friendly urbanity, found them places in the window, and whipped out the wine card.

Crombie deliberated.

"They have to send out for drink, so we must settle this first. What do you like? I can recommend the Asti, if you care for white wine."

Sheila agreed. It reminded her of happy days spent in Florence. Her face looked a little sad. Crombie saw the change, and wondered.

"What is it?" His voice was gentle.

"Nothing. A memory of my childhood." The confidence was involuntary, drawn from her by his intuition, and she felt a little ashamed of the impulse. "It's all right." She looked shy.

"It's all wrong if it hurts you." The words were almost inaudible. He changed the subject tactfully. "Here's Alphonse—with yards of bread. Madame would like six inches."

"Bien, monsieur." The waiter grinned, showing his strong, white teeth in a flash that lit up his swarthy skin. "Monsieur

will always have his jest." His eyes, like sloes, ran over Sheila with a covert curiosity. "Madame does not feel the draught?"

"No, I like it." She took the lengthy list of fare that Crombie proffered. "Oh, I can't choose! Not among all these. I needn't, need I?" She spoke like a child.

A finger with a pointed nail in deep mourning came over her shoulder and underlined a certain item.

"The *risotto* is good to-day, unless Madame prefers an omelet?" Alphonse sounded confidential.

She was amused by his friendly manner.

"You haven't *bouillabaisse*, I suppose?"

"Hélas, non! Madame knows the *Midi*?" Joy beamed out of his dark face. "But, of course!" It was evident that she had won his susceptible heart.

Crombie interposed.

"Supposing we leave it to Alphonse, and see what he brings us. Do you agree?"

"I think it's an excellent idea." She looked relieved. "But nothing English. I want to feel that I've crossed the sea."

"Madame shall have the best there is." The waiter sketched out a menu and went off, proud and happy.

"You're cutting me out," Crombie drawled. "I used to be a favourite here. But he's a true son of the South. Mind you, I don't blame him."

She gave a movement of impatience.

"You don't like my saying that?" The words came quickly.

She looked up and met his gaze, keen and curious.

"No." She answered the question frankly. "I'm not fond of pretty speeches. They always sound artificial, and they break into conversation."

"Like 'Selah' in the Psalms! I'll remember—though mine was sincere. You know"—his smile was a shade wistful—"I should hate to offend you. It's so nice of you to have come here with me to-day. I've been desperately lonely of late, as

I've just lost a great friend. She's sailed to India to join her husband—a dear woman, one of the best! I was allowed to trot her about. I've known her for ten years. She came back with the child who was getting too old for a hot climate, and she'd lost sight of her girlhood friends. I was round at her flat most days, and now I feel"—he shrugged his shoulders—"stranded! We used to have such jolly, happy times together. And she hated parting with the boy. Poor little chap—he's so lonely. I promised to have him up for the day before long. I was wondering——" He paused, a question in his eyes. "Do you care for children?"

"Yes." She smiled, divining his wish. The story had touched her, and she followed up her quick impulse. "Couldn't we take him out together?"

"I was hoping you'd suggest that—hinting at it. Would you, *really*?" He looked at her gratefully. "He's a nice kid—my godchild—quite a little man of the world! His father's Political Resident at a gay station in the Hills. So the youngster's seen quite a lot of life. He precocious, like many Indian children. I'm sure he'll make you 'pretty speeches'! Promise you won't be too severe?" There was mischief in his glance.

"No. It will suit his years." She could not resist the retort.

"Thanks!" He threw back his head and laughed. "I didn't know I was so ancient." Alphonse was brandishing a dish obtrusively under his nose, a rather wet-looking omelet. "I say, can you eat this?"

"Of course! Now let's arrange the outing for your protégé—what's his name?"

"Archie—or, as he'd tell you—Archibald Maynard James. I thought the Zoo in the morning, and a matinée at the Hippodrome——"

She interrupted:

"And lunch with me? Yes, please—it's my turn. You must bring him to my house. Oh—I've a lovely new idea! I'll make him a hamper to take back to school. Like we used to do with my brother—cakes and jam and potted meat."

"What a dear you are!" The words slipped out. He tried vainly to cover them, rather surprised at himself. "I mean—you're really too kind——"

She had to laugh. He looked for the second so nervous, so like a boy caught in a desperate offence, that she could not resist him. She had never seen him humble before.

"Moyra's spoilt me," he explained. "That's Archie's mother. I used to say just what I liked to her, and she always understood."

"Well, so do I." Her voice was friendly, in her generous desire to set him at ease. Crombie took an unfair advantage.

"Is that a bargain?" His eyes twinkled.

"Y—es." It sounded rather dubious. She was conscious that their friendship had made a big stride forward. Was it wise? The old rebellious mood returned. If she liked the man, why not?

"I'll try and behave," he assured her gravely. "As a proof of my desire to please you, I'm going to tell you about Pat. There's a rival on the scene; the fair Doris is undecided——"

But Sheila had checked him.

"I don't want to hear."

He stared at her, piqued and amazed. He thought she had never looked so pretty. There was a warm flush in her cheeks; her eyes were sparkling and triumphant.

"No, I'd sooner Pat told me. He's coming to tea this afternoon. He's sure to confide in me. You see we're such old friends." She enjoyed his discomfiture.

"Then why, may I ask"—he drawled it out—"were you so anxious for news of him earlier in the day?"

"Ah!" Her lips took a mischievous curve. "I thought it polite to seem interested."

Crombie studied her in silence. From a table on their left a shrill voice drifted across.

"Dieu, que tu es embêtant! Je te dis, je vais téléphonier. Tout de suite—pourvu que Guillaume . . ."

The rest was lost, but a single word had brought enlightenment to Crombie.

"You rang Pat up—on your way here? I might have guessed! How like a woman."

"I wanted to enjoy my lunch."

"And spoil mine? I was looking forward to laying the whole case before you. I didn't think you so selfish." He laughed to cover his touch of chagrin.

"Still, you'll admit that I've won?"

"You'll always win." There was more in his glance than in the lightly-spoken words.

Her expression changed. Something wistful stole into her eyes and her smile faded. She seemed to be pondering the remark, withdrawn from him, in a world of her own. He watched her, trying to read her thoughts. He was a man who loved women and generally understood them. But Sheila was a new type. Her very simplicity baffled him. He had been quietly testing her ever since their first meeting, and of one thing he was certain; she was in no sense a flirt. Yet to-day in her attitude he had divined a subtle change. The old air of aloofness was missing. He did not guess that his admiration was acting upon her as a balm after the wound to her self-esteem administered overnight by Philip. But in his uncertainty he added to his former manner a new touch of deference. They ceased to fence with one another.

Crombie exerted his full charm, throwing aside his laziness. He talked of places they both knew, of favourite corners in the South and sunny days among the Snows with the sure touch of a man who has travelled in its fullest sense. They found they were linked by tastes in common. He was eager to gather her opinions, a novel experience to her; for with Philip it was always a case of laying down his point of view with an air of finality that smacked of the Medes and Persians.

She went home well content. She told herself she had found a friend. And friendship was more lasting than love. It was freed from the tyranny of marriage.

CHAPTER XV

IT was Sheila's last At Home before Christmas. For three hours she had been on her feet receiving a steady stream of guests, all her senses on the alert, and she was beginning to feel tired. The Cranstons had just gone, and with their exit had set in that subtle infection of departure which suddenly spreads through a party, breaking up the little groups and sending glances to the clock.

At this moment Horton announced in a sepulchral voice:

"Mrs. Tribe."

And in came a little old lady, wearing a bonnet adorned with pansies and violet strings, and a bodyguard of gaunt daughters, uneasy in their best clothes.

Sheila stared at them for a second. Had they come to the wrong house? They looked so absurdly out of place in the gay London crowd. Then, with a sinking in her heart, she recognized some "dear neighbours" of her aunt, Mrs. Meakens, who had haunted her on her northern visit.

"How do you do?" She advanced smiling, for the old lady was looking dazed.

Mrs. Tribe clutched at her hand.

"I hope you remember us? We thought we'd look in, as we were passing." She gasped it out, rather breathless from her climb up the steep stairs. "We promised your aunt—if we had the chance. But we'd no idea you were giving a *party*!"

Sheila proceeded to reassure her. She greeted the three elderly girls, who all began to talk at once, reminding her of a long-forgotten game of tennis in which she had shared.

Whatever was she to do with them? She glanced across

to the fireplace instinctively. Crombie stood there. He answered her signal of distress and came forward, smiling gravely.

"Can I be of any use?" He added under his breath, "*Tea?*"

"Will you?" She introduced him, conscious of the quaint contrast he made with the provincial quartette.

How kind he was, and "understanding." Throughout the long afternoon he had helped her unobtrusively, divining her wishes, always there when she most needed an aide-de-camp.

She watched him steer Mrs. Tribe through the doorway cheerfully, the daughters waddling in the rear—they looked like a brood of ducklings—and disappear down the narrow stairs. She drew a deep breath of relief and was caught up immediately by a gay trio who declared that she hadn't "spoken a word" to them. So, for another half-hour she was tossed about like a shuttlecock on the social battledore, trying to keep in her head a dozen invitations at once, saying good-bye to people who lingered and repeated the operation, avoiding Magda who wanted to claim her for a serious conversation, and—remembering her duty to Philip—showering attentions on "useful" guests.

For, although their lives were still divided, her moment of active rebellion had passed. Her friendship with Crombie, strengthening daily, had brought the relief of companionship, and with it a feeling of indulgence for her prosaic, absorbed husband. His very aloofness enabled her to see more of the man she liked, and, without analysing it, she felt at times grateful to Philip for his lack of jealousy.

Crombie's tact was unfailing. He never monopolized Sheila nor marked her out by his attentions; he was careful to avoid gossip. But slowly and insidiously he made himself necessary to her. Rarely a couple of days passed without some sign of his presence. He would ring her up or appear at an hour when he was sure to find her alone, execute her commissions, and act as her escort when required. She did

not guess that it meant to him many a postponed engagement. He was always cheerful and leisurely. She learned to lean on his worldly judgment.

Under it all ran something deeper, unexpressed and tacitly shunned: the subtle call of youth to youth, a hint of excitement and adventure which found relief in a glance, in the warm clasp of hands when they met, and the note of reluctance when they parted. Yet outwardly it was platonic. He never overstepped the bounds of a cordial friendliness, and she would not admit to herself that love had entered into the compact. Nevertheless, she was strangely happy, and the fact was apparent in her bearing. She was more assured, yet easier, in her social and political duties. Friends crowded to her banner.

Only Magda divined the cause. She mistrusted the man, and he knew it. They were enemies from their first meeting.

The last stragglers drifted out, and Sheila followed them downstairs to find a deserted dining-room and the hush that succeeds a party—a relief in itself, yet slightly depressing, with its covert suggestion of gaiety passed and little to show in return. Through the open door of the study she could hear Philip's measured voice in an argument with a sole survivor over a parting cigarette. Then a quick step sounded, and Crombie appeared on the threshold.

"What luck! You're all alone. I've just packed my precious convoy into a mouldy four-wheeler. They wanted to say good-bye to you, but I headed them off successfully. Such a lot of messages. I thought the old lady was going to kiss me!"

"Have you been with them all this time?"

He nodded his head.

"I've made a conquest!" He pushed an arm-chair forward from its banishment in a corner. "Sit down. You look tired out."

She obeyed him with a grateful glance.

"You *have* been good! I felt selfish, but the Tribes were the last straw. People I hardly knew, up in town for a week.

I hadn't seen them for five years. It's a wonder that I recognized them."

"Well, they're rather—individual, aren't they?" He leaned against the mantelpiece and surveyed her with twinkling eyes. "But I liked the old lady—she's a dear! And the daughters *fed*. All the time! They're 'stoked' for the week's campaign—amazing what they put away! Mrs. Tribe's a wonderful woman, brimming over with information." He walked across to the long table, filled a glass and brought it back. "If you'll drink this, I'll tell you more. I feel like an Encylopædia. She gave me no end of useful tips."

"Is this 'cup' all right?" She could not, as yet, dissociate herself from her labours. She tasted it doubtfully For to play hostess in a house too small for the number of guests and with a modest staff of servants was no slight undertaking.

"Excellent—you needn't ask. Everything's good in your house."

Their eyes met and she smiled. She knew that his praise was sincere. He looked so handsome standing there in his well-cut clothes, such a sure judge, that a thrill of pride ran through her. Her cheeks warmed and she changed the subject.

"What did the old lady teach you?"

"I must think. There was such a lot of things. Oh, I know!" He steadied his face. "She noticed that I ran a finger along my collar—a habit of mine. It's due to social nervousness."

Sheila laughed mockingly. For Crombie was rarely at a loss.

"You *are* shy! Go on."

"So she told me the cure. If your collar rubs you, is frayed, you know"—his eyes danced, for his linen was always immaculate—"you take a piece of brown soap, and you lick it——"

"I'm sure you're making this up!"

"No, it's true. That's half the battle. The soap mustn't

be really wet or later on you begin to *froth*——" He broke down and his laugh rang out.

"Sheila!" It was Philip's voice.

"Yes?" She started to her feet.

Crombie frowned.

"Why can't he come and find her himself instead of calling?" This was his private criticism. He heartily disliked his host; he guessed more than Sheila imagined. He watched the pair in the doorway.

"It's only to say that I'm off," Philip announced solemnly. "I may be rather late this evening—the servants needn't sit up." He glanced at the remnants of the feast. "Isn't it time you had this cleared? No one will be coming now. Oh, I see——" He caught sight of Crombie, and his voice took on a suaver inflexion. He addressed him pointedly. "Won't you have a whisky and soda? In my study."

"No, thanks."

"Then I'll say good-night. I'm dining out."

With a nod, he was turning away, but Sheila, obeying a sudden impulse, laid a hand upon his arm.

"How did it go off?" she asked.

"Oh, all right." It sounded tepid. He could not resist a criticism. "The iced coffee was rather too sweet. You might mention that, my dear."

The smile on her tired face faded. She had worked hard since early morning, and a word of praise would have been sweet. But Philip was always dampening.

She nodded her head, without comment, and came back into the room.

Crombie noticed the droop of her shoulders and cursed his own helplessness.

"I suppose I ought to go," he said. "I don't want to." His eyes were wistful.

"No, stay for a minute and talk. I've hardly had time to speak to you." She sank down in the arm-chair.

"What are you going to do about dinner? Is it any good suggesting that you should come out somewhere with me?"

"I couldn't to-night." She smiled limply. "I shall finish off the sandwiches. I always have a picnic meal after a party to spare the servants. As a matter of fact, I enjoy it."

He hesitated, then brought it out.

"Let me stay and wait on you? Do? I promise I'll give no trouble. You can make use of me later on. I'm splendid at moving furniture!" He laughed with a note of eagerness.

"But it's not enough for a man. I really mean it. There'll be no 'dinner.'" She was tempted to keep him. She felt lonely and too weary to raise objections.

"Is that the only reason?" he asked. "If so, it's ruled out. The point is, shall I tire you? Would you rather be alone?"

"No. But I don't want you to starve."

"What nonsense! With all that——" He waved his hand to the crowded table. "I'm going to stay and enjoy myself. If I talk too much, turn me out."

"Oh, it isn't that! Besides, you're restful. Yes, I mean it, honestly. You don't find fault and you don't argue—two things that I detest. As a matter of fact, I'm not tired, but a little cross—and *very* footsore!"

"Is that the trouble?" He was gone.

She heard him call to one of the servants and presently he returned, her bedroom slippers in his hand.

"Now, don't you move." He knelt down and, before she could stir herself to protest, unfastened the tight bronze strap across her instep and took off her shoes. "Poor little feet!" Tenderly he slipped on the loose slippers, reached sideways for a footstool, and lifted them lightly on to the prop. "There! Isn't that much better? I'd make a splendid lady's maid."

"I think you would—you're so kind. Fancy you thinking of these old comforts!" She was touched and she did not hide the impression.

"I wish——" He checked himself with an effort and stood up; his face was strained. "Now, I'll just make up this fire. It's getting chilly, isn't it?"

"Yes, and I haven't one upstairs. We shall have to stay here this evening."

She watched him choose the lumps of coal and put them on noiselessly. A sense of well-being stole over her. How nice it was to give in, be waited upon and to feel that she was so much in touch with this man that they could enjoy a friendly silence, were nearer in fact for the lack of speech. Her thoughts, pursuing some hidden path, wandered back to the Craiks. The analogy startled her. For she had once condemned Cara for the part Tim had played in her husband's house. And wasn't this the same thing? No, of course not. Craik had been in love with Cara from the start, whereas Crombie—— Her conscience pricked her. She stifled it. This was only friendship. It was absurd to imagine things. He had been the same with Mrs. James, the mother of the little boy with whom they had had such a jolly day, and Crombie had emphasized the fact of that affair being strictly platonic. He liked women and said so frankly, and under all his social veneer and his love of London life was a strain of domesticity that only a home could satisfy. It was good for him, Sheila told herself, to feel that her house was one, a quiet corner where he was welcome. He was not, like Philip, self-sufficient.

His voice broke through her philosophy:

"I had a letter to-day from Archie, who seems settling down at school. He sent you his love, and his favourite jams are apricot and strawberry. I blush to deliver such a message! Still, it isn't all one-sided. He's sending you his photograph."

"That's worth a cupboardful of jam! I should like to adopt Archie. What would his godfather say?"

There came an odd little pause. She glanced up, rather surprised, and Crombie answered drawlingly:

"He'd be delighted. Let's share him."

He was twirling his eyeglass round and round, gazing into the bright fire. She guessed that something was troubling him. Could he be jealous of her with the boy? She knew he was much attached to him.

"That's generous of you," she said lightly. "I shan't forget you owned him first. Now I think of it, he's rather like you, with his black hair and blue eyes, though his skin's so fair——" She paused, perplexed. For Crombie had turned abruptly away. Again she had the intuition of treading on forbidden ground. Had she revived a memory of Mrs. James? At the thought, a sudden prick of jealousy stung her.

How absurd! Moyra had been a friend of his for years past; he had owned to missing her. What reason had Sheila to feel aggrieved? She scolded herself, a little startled.

"You're sure it's not his nose?" drawled Crombie. "It's rather a touchy point with me. A family inheritance—about all my father left me!"

She was relieved at the joke. For Archie boasted a small "snub." In Crombie it was his most prominent feature, well-shaped and aquiline.

"No, it's only his colouring. But of course we must give his nose time. It might——" She stopped.

The door had opened and Horton was surveying the pair, disapproval on her face.

"You want to clear away?" asked Sheila. "Very well. But just leave some sandwiches and cake on the table. Would you like to choose?" She had turned to Crombie. "Remember, it's the whole of your dinner!"

Horton's countenance relaxed. She foresaw a quiet evening, the mistress engaged with her guest. There would be no strenuous "tidying up," and Crombie was always good for a tip.

"Shall I lay for two, m'm?" Her voice was bland. "Cook has some soup if you'd like it warmed."

"Another conquest," Sheila pronounced when the trim figure was out of earshot. "First Mrs. Tribe, then Horton. Aren't you feeling proud of yourself?"

His lips twisted.

"Not altogether."

"It's the room," said Sheila vaguely.

"What's wrong with it?" He looked round him.

"Ghosts. They live behind the panels, and they disapprove of me and my friends."

"Tell me why. I'm interested."

"I don't quite know. I'm too modern—or too dull for their taste! At least that's my impression. They resent the present generation." She gave vent to her fancy. "I feel their eyes watching me, and hear light steps that tap, tap, with high heels—even laughter, far away and full of malice. Sometimes when I come home late, after a dance, it seems to me that there's resistance in the air as if they crowded on the stairs and forced me back and the house is full of silent aggression, most uncanny."

"I wonder?" He was quite serious. "It's very old, isn't it? I expect these walls have seen a lot. I've an idea—I'll tell you later. Perhaps we can exorcize them. You know, I believe in ghosts. We've a grey lady at my home who cries—you can hear her sobbing. It's in one of the passages. Of course sceptics say it's an echo from a chimney when the wind's high, but an old nurse of mine once saw her. The description fitted a great-aunt who died of a broken heart. I dare say there are ghosts here. We'll try and lay them, after dinner."

She nodded, a finger to her lips, for Horton was coming back with a tray and Sheila did not wish to start a rumour that the place was haunted.

Crombie guessed what was in her mind and went on in a spirit of mischief:

"They deserve it."

She frowned at him.

"To be late." His eyes twinkled. "If they *will* take four-wheelers. But they couldn't all get into a hansom. A dear old lady, so full of knowledge! There's something you do when you spill the claret. But it means taking off the cloth. This needs nerve in a strange house—I don't think that I could face it. I'm brave enough in many ways, but to remove all the guests from round another man's table and

whisk off the cloth with an air of ease——" He paused. There came a stifled sound covered by a rattle of spoons and Horton vanished to hide her shame. "I made her laugh! I've been trying for weeks to break down her stony pride." He leaned towards Sheila coaxingly. "Say you're glad?"

"I think it's a shame."

"You don't—you're *glad.*"

She nodded her head.

"I give in. It's bad for you, but I'm too lazy to resist."

Truth lay beneath the jest. For again she felt the magnetism of the man's close presence; felt, too, a curious joy in submitting to it. Then, almost unconsciously, she made a furtive sign to him as he still bent across her chair. Solid steps were crossing the landing.

"I like you lazy," he said quickly and drew back to his former position.

. . . . . .

He reverted to the forbidden topic of ghosts after their primitive meal as they sat on either side of the fire in the stillness of the curtained room.

"Have you ever tried sounding the panels? They might be hiding some secret."

"No, it didn't occur to me."

"Ah, that's where you need an expert." He stretched out his long legs to the cheerful blaze and studied his boots, his dark head on one side.

Sheila's eyes followed his glance to the well-shod feet, with their high insteps, the leather cleaving to the ankles, which were finely cut, showing, above, a line of sock in black silk shot through with amber. She approved the air of finish about him which missed the studied effect of the dandy and yet qualified his clothes. She was in a peacefully drowsy mood in which details gain importance. His boots gave her a vague pleasure.

"Well?" She stifled a yawn, smiling.

"You sleepy thing!" He laughed at her. "I see I shall

have to do all the work. I once found a secret passage in an old house down in Norfolk and, ever since, panels attract me. It led to a priest's hiding-place—quite an exciting discovery! I had a bedroom over the hall with a powder cupboard at one end and I noticed that in the same place downstairs there was nothing to correspond. Just a plain panelled wall plumb with the fireplace. So we measured the two rooms and it bore out my suspicions. Then we worked round the woodwork, tapping it, and at one spot it sounded hollow—you couldn't mistake it. Eventually we loosened the panel and there were steps leading up to a little chamber against the chimney, with a loophole hidden in the ivy covering the outside wall. There was nothing in it, worse luck, except an amazing amount of dirt and a bird's nest." He got up. "Shall I worry you if I prowl round and sound the walls?"

She shook her head.

"Not at all. It must have been an exciting moment when you first found the steps."

"It was more exciting next morning when my hostess complained of the mess we had made. Her husband laid it all on me. Promise you won't do the same?"

"I'll be discreet—and sweep up! What shall we find here?"

"Some mystery. I'm sensing it. It's in the air." As he passed her chair, he paused and added, "You're quite right about this house; it's not one of the welcoming kind, though I've never noticed it before. Partly because"—he was watching her face, warmed by the glow of the fire, and he hesitated, searching for words—"it has a stronger spell for me."

She did not question the remark. He went on thoughtfully:

"You need not be afraid of ghosts—of any kind. They can't touch you. You're too vividly alive. You take hold of the present and the past loses all its magic. The secret of personality: you absorb everything into yourself." He seemed to be working out his idea aloud for his own benefit,

hardly aware of her presence. "And you're so unconscious of your power."

She put up a protesting hand, vaguely disturbed. His words roused an odd tumult in her heart, together with a thrill of danger.

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that. You know I hate pretty speeches." It cost her an effort to say it calmly; for something in his Northern voice aroused a longing to hear more.

"They're *not* 'pretty'!" The words were hot. He swung round, away from her. Then he pulled himself in hand. "Very well. I'm duly snubbed." He laughed. "Those ghosts shall pay for this," and began to tap the nearest wall with his knuckles, head bent, listening.

After a moment he looked sideways. His face had recovered its normal expression of cool and indolent good humour.

"Supposing we find a skeleton—the historic one in the family cupboard—what shall we do with it?"

In the relief that she felt from the tension of the moment when she divined his genuine anger, Sheila gave way to a ribald impulse.

"Put it in Philip's bed."

The moment the words had passed her lips she regretted the childish speech. It seemed disloyal, in his absence.

Crombie looked mischievous.

"Would he *mind*?" Aware that his tone of voice betrayed him, he added hurriedly, "I should think your husband had good nerves—wouldn't be frightened easily. I always admire his air of composure." He reverted to the original subject. "I should like to find some old letters hidden away, or a broken dagger—'all bluggy,' as the children say."

"Don't be so gruesome!" Sheila shivered. She watched him set to work again. "I feel so idle. Can't I help?"

"No. You rest and *will* the ghosts to give up their ancient secrets."

"And keep quiet, you might add." For she saw that he was trying to listen.

"I might, but I daren't," he laughed back.

"So you talk yourself," she retorted.

He placed a finger on his lips, a mischievous question in his eyes.

"I've guessed!" She had read his thoughts. "You're bribing me with the 'last word.'"

He nodded, amused, faintly triumphant. Often now, without stooping to speech, their minds leaped forth to meet each other. It was a new game to Sheila. Crombie knew its charm—and its peril!

She slipped lower in the chair, her eyes half-closed, a smile on her lips. Tap, tap, went Crombie's knuckles. From far away came the gay tinkle of hansom bells down Oxford Street. It reminded her of the lonely evening she had spent on the night of Philip's return. This was more like married life as she had once pictured it, the two chairs drawn up to the fire, the sense of happy comradeship.

Dangerous thoughts. She dreamed on.

In the Windmill Farm Tim and Cara would be wrapped in the same intimate peace, talking or working side by side after Mick had been put to bed. Cara had found the way out; the happiness that evaded Sheila, staring down the Empty Road.

Tap, tap, went Crombie's fingers. They seemed to be rapping out a tune like a distant drum and she felt restless. Outside a board went off "Crack!" with the pistol-shot of dry old wood and she started, holding back her breath.

Crombie's house was haunted too; but it sounded a dear old place. He had described it to her at dinner. "Not much to look at," he had said, but "jolly snug" with its thick walls. There was fishing—"quite decent fishin'"—and the chance of a bird on the moor. His parents were dead but his sisters lived there and he stayed with them every autumn. Hester—that was the eldest girl—"spoilt" him, he explained.

Who wouldn't spoil Crombie, Sheila wondered, once they had broken through the crust of his worldly manner to the depths where that quickened voice belonged; the voice that

had warmed and blurred as he talked of his old home in the North. Some day he would "go and live there for good," when he was "heartily sick of town." Or if he married and had children. London was no place for them. They ought to run wild in the open as he had done in his boyhood. He grew more youthful himself at the thought and recounted some of his early exploits. In return Sheila had dwelt upon the glories of Crosskeys and sunny summers spent at Goring.

"Why didn't I know you then?" he had asked.

She wished with all her heart that he had. It might have saved her from Sandy and, what was worse, from the warped views which had driven her into Philip's arms. What a mistake it had been! Here she was, at twenty-four, doomed to live this barren life for years which she dare not count, growing old by Philip's side yet cheated of all that would make life sweet. Philip was like a black frost. He chilled all the youth in her with his dampening precision. Instinctively she compared him with Crombie, with his warm hand-clasp and air of vigour—like a Northern day, crisp and sunny. He made all her senses tingle, roused her old sporting instincts, her wits sharpened to meet his.

"But we shouldn't really quarrel, if——" Dismayed she left the thought unfinished. She looked up with a sense of shame as though the object might have guessed it. But Crombie was plainly absorbed in his task. He had made the circuit of the walls and was now on the other side of the hearth.

Suddenly she heard him give a quick exclamation. He turned his head.

"I say, listen!" He rapped the woodwork. "Doesn't that sound different? From this——" He attacked another spot.

"I believe it does." She stirred herself and crossed the rug to his side. "Let me try." She repeated the process. "I'm sure it's hollow!" She caught his excitement. "What are we going to do now?"

"Get it loose, if we can." He produced a penknife, opened it and ran the blade along the moulding. "I wish I had a better light."

"I'll fetch a candle. Wait for me!" she called back over her shoulder.

"All right. I'll play fair." He smiled, amused by her sudden keenness. "We're partners in this enterprise."

As she crossed the landing she said to herself, "Co-partnership," and winced at the word. It symbolized her crowning folly.

The study felt cold as a tomb. She hunted on the writing-table for the little silver candlestick that Philip used when sealing letters. Above the orderly files of paper, a portrait of herself smiled down, radiant in her wedding-dress, the veil a mist about her head, the long train swept round her feet. Her signature sprawled across it: "From your loving wife."

Her lips curled. "Loving?" What was the use of that? Under the bronze letter-weight was a slip of paper with a note: "Remind S. her income is due." Ah!—she could be useful here. Bills to settle! The cynical thought added a spark to recklessness.

Crombie was struck by her expression as she came back. She looked so vivid entering the dim old room. He felt a pulse stir in his throat.

"Now!" Her voice had a thrill in it. "If it comes to the worst we'll smash the panel."

"Is that your mood? How splendid! I'm game for anything."

She held the light above his head. He adjusted it and their fingers met. He controlled the desire to let his linger.

"That's better." The words were jerky. He slipped the blade into the crack, pressing the panel with his hand. "It's moving——"

"No?"

"Yes, I felt it give."

There followed a tense minute of silence. Then, with a creak, the panel shifted sideways, leaving a narrow slit that gaped at them, black and hollow.

"Hurrah!" He tossed the knife away and used both hands to enlarge the opening. Grating and jarring, the dry

old wood resisted his efforts; then, all at once, slid back along its grooves. They were staring into a little cupboard.

Sheila gave a gasp of joy, bending forward to light up the space, wreathed with cobwebs, where tiny fragments of rotting, worm-eaten wood hung, like fish caught in a grimy net. The shelves were thick with the dust of ages.

"It's filthy! Mind your dress," Crombie warned her hastily. "No, you're not to do that—— I'll get it." For her hand had gone out to a distant object. "And you're dropping the grease, I'm being anointed!" He retrieved the candle just in time. "A moment's patience." He pushed up his cuffs.

"I hate patience!"

"So do I." He tore away the screen of cobwebs and dived in recklessly.

"First trophy!" He drew it out, held the object over the grate and blew a cloud of dust from off it. "What will you give me for this?" he bargained.

"Nothing—it's *mine*." She held out her hand.

"Not by law. It's treasure trove." He was teasing her. "Say 'please.'"

He saw rebellion flash up in her eyes, then a curious indecision. He waited, smiling and confident. To his surprise she turned away and went slowly back to her chair. He did not guess what the effort cost her.

For a moment he hesitated. Then he followed rather humbly—laid his offering on her lap.

"Thank you." She did not look up. "It's a fan—a little broken fan! In sandal-wood." She bent her head. "It's still scented. How wonderful!" She opened the pierced yellow sticks where the faded ribbon had ravelled away, and tried vainly to fit them together.

"You like it?" His voice was subdued.

"Yes. Is there anything more?"

"I'll see." He went back to the wall.

This time he took the poker and ran it along the narrow shelves, which gave up two further secrets, a tassel and cord in tarnished gold and a slim packet of dusty letters.

"And that's the lot," Crombie announced. "Not a bad haul, all the same. I don't wonder the place is haunted! This has come off some gallant's sword." He held up the dusty knot. "I wish it could tell us its history. Perhaps the letters may give us a clue. Shall I close up the secret panel?"

"If you're sure——" Her curiosity, restrained by her will, broke out again. "*Quite* sure there's nothing more."

"Parole d'honneur!" He finished his task.

"Now"—he stood by her side—"you're to read these." He added the packet to the fan on her knee. "But first I'll give you my idea. There's a whole romance in these three things. Can't you guess it?"

She shook her head. She was glad that she had resisted the impulse prompting her to give way to him, but a shade nervous of the result. It must have seemed uncommonly like a perverse fit of temper. She wanted now to smooth it over.

"Tell me what you're imagining."

"I don't imagine." He smiled. "I *know*. Some ghost whispered it in my ear—the ghost of a long-dead lover. He fought a duel for his lady—that's his sword-knot. She treasured it with the fan he had given her and his written words, those faded letters. She broke the fan at a ball on the night when she learnt that her lover was dead. She was holding it in her little hand when they brought her the tragic news, trying to look unconcerned and picturing him on the wet grass, a rapier through his gallant heart. Afterwards she hid it away in a secret place ignored by her husband. And when you hear high heels tapping down the stairs at night, it's *her* step. She has stolen back for another peep at her treasures."

"How pretty! I wonder if you're right." She drew out the topmost letter slowly, almost reverently, caught by the glamour his words had evoked.

The tiny envelope, yellowed by age, bore traces of writing too faint to decipher, but inside the ink was plain on the narrow margined sheet. A sudden scruple invaded her.

"I don't think we ought to read it. It seems like treachery to the dead."

Crombie looked disappointed.

"Why? It can't injure anyone. Besides, my story was only guess-work. The ghosts led us to the secret. It might concern some legacy. Give it to me if you feel like that. Unless——" He paused.

She passed it across.

"On your own head be it," she said lightly.

He smiled.

"I accept the consequences."

A silence hung over the room, broken by the faint rustle as he turned the thin page. Sheila watched him, interested. She saw his expression change. At first curious and amused it became tinged with sympathy. When he looked up his eyes were wistful.

"It's a love-letter," he said softly. "Rather touching. Shall I read it? The writing's cramped and difficult, you mightn't be able to make it out."

A feminine instinct brought "No" to her lips, but she checked it suddenly, conscious of the difficulty of explaining her objection.

Crombie took her consent for granted.

"The first part is formal enough. The writer declines some invitation, apparently on her advice. Then he lets himself go. Listen——" He smoothed out the page before him, leaning against the arm of her chair, glancing, at times, at her still face.

"'It is not alone y^r^ Beauty and Grace that hold me captive in Love's Chains, but the knowledge of y^r^ Faith in me, that Charity by which I live.

"'Through these weary days, when every thought flies swift to you and each beat of my heart whispers y^r^ dear forbidden name, I exist on the memory of an Hour made perfect by y^r^ Gracious Pity. Yet, when we meet my lips are dumb, sealed by my Longing and my Despair, the immensity of my Ambition—beyond the dreams of Worldly Fortune. I vow that

when you smile on me, out of the Garden of y^r face, I am caught up on the Wings of Passion and all else fades away: Fame, Honour, the Praise of Men'——" He stopped, choking. "It's too true! I can't—— Sheila?" He bent closer. "You *know* I love you?" His voice shook. "For God's sake, give me—your 'Charity'!"

The cry rang sharply in her ears, intense, husky with emotion. She felt his fingers close on her arm as he leaned nearer, with hungry eyes. And suddenly her dream returned: the warm clasp of his hand, the compelling power of his presence, and her old strange helplessness. Before she had time to summon her will she was gathered up in his embrace, his lips stifled her faint protest and something hitherto unknown cried out in her exultantly that this was love, her right and guerdon, due to her starved womanhood.

The next moment she found herself forced back in the arm-chair. Crombie, after his swift recoil, had reached the other side of the fireplace. Seizing the poker he began to jab viciously at the coals, his shoulders turned to the room.

She stared, amazed and indignant. What possessed him? Was he mad? A slight sound caught her attention. She glanced sideways. The door was open. Philip stood upon the threshold.

After the first sickening fear her courage rose and fought with her shame.

"I shall tell him the truth," she decided. "I shan't pretend—if he asks me." She clenched her hands on the arms of the chair and waited, tense, for the conflict. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Crombie wheel round and straighten his broad shoulders. He had tried to save the situation; now he was ready for the worst.

Philip moved forward into the room. His face looked ghastly, the lips compressed. Half-way across he swerved to the right, stretched out his hand over the sideboard and seized a soda-water siphon.

Sheila's sensitive nostrils curled. She watched her husband fill a glass and raise it unsteadily to his lips. He gulped down

a couple of mouthfuls. Then, for the first time, he spoke, his cold eyes on his wife.

"I'm not well." His voice was morose. "I've been poisoned by a bad oyster."

She caught her breath with a little gasp. It was so utterly unexpected. Before she could shake off her surprise or reply to this amazing speech, Philip had beaten a solemn retreat. With the tumbler balanced in his hand, self-absorbed, ignoring them both, he went out and closed the door.

Silence. It seemed to last for hours.

A faint quaver of sound broke it from where Crombie stood on the hearth-rug. Sheila could not see his face, but his shoulders were quivering.

"I thought—I thought——" He gave it up, the fierce attempt to control his sense of the ludicrous side of the situation intensified by immense relief. His head went down upon his hands. "I can't help it. I *can't*, my dear! He looked so tragic. Oh Lord, how funny!" He rocked on his feet, weak with laughter.

She felt the infection gaining on her, against her will. She was very angry. With a swirl of her skirts, she rose from her chair.

"I must go to him."

A grudging pity and the forgotten sense of duty were blent with her longing to escape. She could not remain and laugh at her husband. With Crombie—who had said he loved her!

"Yes. It's wiser," Crombie gasped.

He reached the door just in time. His face was very serious now. He looked thoroughly repentant.

"I'm awfully sorry. *Do* forgive me?"

She did not answer. He watched her cross the narrow landing, then hesitate. He came up quickly behind her.

"Say something, for heaven's sake! If it's only good night." His voice was broken.

As he stood there, almost touching her, the knowledge that he was suffering came to her overwhelmingly. She could hear

the hard beat of his heart in the strained silence of the walls—the panelled walls that seemed to listen.

"I *can't*!" she whispered over her shoulder.

It was a woman's confession of weakness; all indeed that Crombie needed. He drew back into the shadows and watched her enter her husband's room.

Then his common sense returned.

Gathering up his coat and hat he groped his way downstairs. The latch was stiff. He fumbled with it and became aware of the crumpled letter still clutched in his left hand. He folded it with a faint smile and placed it in an inner pocket.

The door still resisted his efforts. At last, with a jerk, he threw it wide. On the opposite side of the street a policeman was moving towards his beat, a solid reminder of law and order. Stars shone in the frosty sky and a cold wind bore across from the Park.

Crombie turned up his coat collar and drew a deep breath of relief. He closed the door softly behind him. Quickly too. Then jeered at himself. For in the narrow darkened hall he had been conscious of a force that played with him and delayed his escape, almost the sense of ghostly hands stretching out from the old walls to claim another victim of passion.

CHAPTER XVI

MAGDA'S drawing-room seemed to reflect the personality of its owner, Sheila decided as she warmed her feet at the newly-lit gas-stove.

It had a certain business-like air with its big bureau, near the light, the pigeon-holes bulging with papers; but, here and there, was a vivid touch of colouring in the shape of a picture, an isolated piece of china, or a fragment of embroidery. The well-worn Chesterfield, covered with some dark material, was brightened by two orange cushions, barrel-shaped with oxidized tassels, and against a typewriter in the window lolled a guitar, from which a streak of vivid blue ribbon flaunted as though it protested against its neighbour.

The slipshod little maid, with a cap that rose on end like a plate in the draught of the outer door, had delivered a message breathlessly on Sheila's arrival at the flat. Her mistress had been detained, but had telephoned to beg her guest to wait as she would be home at five. "Without *file*," said the little maid.

Sheila was glad of the short respite. The day had been a busy one, complicated by Philip's illness, the doctor's visit, and engagements to be cancelled by wire and letter. Philip was not a good patient. He resented the doctor's optimism and cast doubts on the treatment which was mainly concerned with a low diet. She had left him at last in Horton's care brooding over weak tea and toast.

Her thoughts turned back to the night before. It was evident that Philip's entry had been timed after Crombie's swift movement, due to an approaching footstep. Her husband

had made no allusion to his presence in the house. Although this was a relief to her mind, it did not affect the main problem confronting her, nor remove a persistent, unnerving suspicion of guilt.

She was too honest to stifle her conscience by laying all blame on Crombie's shoulders. She knew—and this filled her with amazement—that for one sharp, breathless moment she had given way to an answering wave of feeling as perilous as his own. The fact that this could have happened to her, of all women, so sure of herself, so strict in her views of right and wrong as applied to other people's conduct, played havoc with her theories. There could be only one explanation: she must have fallen in love with Crombie.

What was to be the end of it?

Of one thing she was certain. They could never go back to the old terms of free and happy comradeship. "The barque of Friendship" had sailed away and there remained either a parting or a total revision of her creed, which held that marriage was a bond unbreakable save by death It was typical of her character that she never dreamed of a middle course. But she hated her present life, and the thought of what it would mean to her without Crombie's kindly presence, his intuition, and personal charm, brought with it a sense of loss well-nigh unbearable.

If he loved her—as Tim loved Cara—could she face that stony road trodden by her favourite cousin at the cost of her old ideals? Was love worth the price? Not only love but companionship. Mick's face rose before her, adding weight to the temptation.

Her life at present was a waste. Philip needed her for her money. He had not played fair. He deserved to lose her. But what would her father say? And Rex, who was so positive on things "one could do" and one "couldn't"!

She shrank from the thought of their dismay and the shattering of their faith in her. There was more than love in life, there was pride. This, she saw, was the test. For, if pride stood in her way, was it love she felt for Crombie? And,

if not—— Her cheeks flushed. She would not admit to herself it was passion.

Brought to this issue by her logic, she was thankful for the break in her thoughts made by Magda's voice in the hall. She glanced hurriedly at the mirror, for her hostess must never guess—Magda, who believed her happy and was one of Philip's oldest friends.

This invitation to "tea and a chat" had been pressed on Sheila at her At Home when Magda had hinted at some reason for a quiet conversation. Conscious of having neglected her friend somewhat in the past weeks, her spare time given to Crombie, Sheila had welcomed the suggestion. On several occasions when Magda had called on one of her hurried visits she had found the latter in possession. There was no love lost between them.

She came in now in her usual haste, apologetic, glowing with health.

"*Do* forgive me? I was kept." She kissed Sheila on both cheeks and held her out at arm's length. "You look tired. Is that the party?"

"I daresay. But I've been resting. Your room is so nice and quiet. And I've fallen in love with your yellow cushions."

"You like the colour? I've had them re-covered, and I was tempted by that orange." Magda sank down beside her and pulled off her thick gloves. "They were a present from your husband, years ago—they're not new—but they started life in sober black."

"Philip's taste, and now yours?" Sheila laughed. "I should have guessed it." But she felt inwardly surprised. Philip was chary in his gifts. "I'm quite sure you added the tassels. They're so like you." Her voice was teasing.

"Meaning that we're both barbaric?" Magda nodded cheerfully. "But you're wrong. They were there from the start. Your husband is so generous! As a matter of fact the cushions were a thank-offering for a service—quite a small one—I rendered him. I had not the heart to refuse them."

She busied herself with the tea brought in by the small

servant, shuffling in her untidy slippers. As she left the room she tripped on the mat and retired with a muffled "Oh lor!"

Magda caught Sheila's smile.

"That's the *third* I've had since my return! And the best—in the sense that she means well. But her feet seem too big for her. A friend of mine has christened her 'Scuffles.' I've really no time to train her. Sugar?" She held up the tongs, the gas-light playing on her ring, drawing blue magic from the opal.

"Please." Sheila took the cup. Her eyes caught sight of the clock, and she sighed. "I mustn't stay very long, so if there's anything important to discuss, I'm warning you." She hazarded a suggestion. "Did I speak badly the other night? I didn't feel in the mood, and that hall has a disconcerting echo."

"I know. But I heard you quite distinctly, so you can set your mind at rest—on that point." Magda paused. A frown gathered between her brows, which were dark and delicately arched. "It wasn't about work at all that I wanted to see you this afternoon."

Sheila watched her, a shade uneasy.

"Is there anything wrong, Magda?" she asked.

"Not with myself. It concerns you. And it's difficult to explain."

"Why?" Sheila was on her guard. "If I've done anything to annoy you, I'd far sooner you spoke out. We don't generally play with words." She forced a smile. "Please tell me?"

Still Magda hesitated, avoiding the other's critical glance. At last she seemed to make up her mind.

"Very well. I'll put it bluntly. You may say that it's no concern of mine, but I don't think your husband's happy."

Sheila stared at her, amazed. The speech was utterly unexpected.

"Whatever makes you say that? Unless, perhaps, you've heard that he's ill."

"Ill?" Magda turned quickly. "What is the matter?" Her voice was anxious.

'Nothing much—a passing trouble. He ate an oyster that

wasn't good." As she spoke, the scene overnight flashed up not without humour yet stung by a guilty consciousness. She felt the colour rise in her cheeks and went on hurriedly, "The doctor says he'll be quite well in a day or two, with a careful diet." She added in a lighter tone, "I'll tell him of your kind inquiries. He will be flattered to think that you care."

It was said without any hidden intention, but Magda flinched. She was paler than ever, her long fingers intertwined restlessly, her eyes averted.

Suddenly she looked up.

"I do care. I've always cared." There was a desperate directness in the way she brought out the words. It had the effect of a challenge. "I care so much that I can tell you honestly, without shame. For Philip's sake." She rose to her feet. The close vicinity of his wife troubled her, and unconsciously she stepped back, still facing Sheila. "I should not do it without an object. One thing you must understand. Philip has never guessed the truth. He never will—unless you tell him."

"*Magda!*" Hurt and indignant, bewildered by this astounding confession, Sheila stared up at her friend, superb in attitude, unflinching. She felt utterly confounded. Magda and Philip? Incredible!

With a wave of her hand, as though she dismissed her last words as unimportant, Magda went on:

"I feel that I'm responsible, to a great extent, for your marriage. I brought you together. I believed that you would make Philip happy. I stood aside. It wasn't easy—I couldn't have done it for every one. But I loved you, Sheila. I do still, although I'm bitterly disappointed. I thought you the right wife for him. But Philip's changing. He's years older, he's losing interest in the cause. He's harassed over money matters. Whilst you"—her voice vibrated with scorn—"go your own way unheeding, absorbed in another man."

It was out, the definite accusation. Perilously near the truth, it swept aside the touch of pity with which Sheila had silently listened.

"You've no right to say that." There came an ominous little pause. Then she threw down the gauntlet. "If you were so fond of him, why didn't you marry Philip yourself?"

Madga's glance met hers fully.

"He never asked me to be his wife."

The honesty of the reply compelled Sheila's admiration. There was something regal in a pride which could admit this intimate failure to a more successful rival.

"He might have done," Sheila announced in an impulse of generosity. No atom of jealousy possessed her, only a vague, growing regret.

"If I had schemed, or interfered. But I was too poor to help him on."

So simply was it said that the other woman's glance fell. Here was a love unknown to her, purified by sacrifice. It humbled her, even now, in the midst of her defiance.

"I never guessed." She bit her lip. "I always thought of you differently. That, after your husband's death——" She paused, startled, for Magda had laughed.

"I didn't care *that* for my husband!" She snapped her fingers contemptuously. "He drank." With this she dismissed him—a typical touch, dramatic but true. "But it made me appreciate Philip. His goodness, his clear brain, his chivalry to all women." A rapt look came into her face, and she went on, in a softer voice, "He used to come here, night after night, and talk to me of his ambitions, his purpose in life, his high ideals. Those were the days of my happiness—the summer before I met you in Cairo. He said I helped him. I think I did. I brought him in touch with useful people. He turned to me in all his doubts. He was a friend in the noblest sense—a man utterly to be trusted."

Sheila had listened with tightening lips, torn between scorn and pity. How could Philip—so self-absorbed, so cold and ungenerous—have stirred such a passion in this woman, beautiful still in her fortieth year? Was all love an illusion? Magda had clothed Antrobus with the virtues she admired, had seen in his chilly temperament the self-control of a fine nature.

Only his wife guessed the truth. A pawn in his subtle hands, he had skilfully used this loving woman to widen his circle of acquaintance, the Suffrage cause but another rung on the long ladder of success.

Yet even now, as she stood against the mellow background of the screen, its worn leather accentuating the warm pallor of her face, her red mouth and glowing eyes, Magda was lost in some memory that brought a pathetic smile to her lips. She looked like a high priestess of passion.

"What a waste," thought Sheila. "It isn't only Youth that pays. First her husband, and then *this*—— And she's too old to love again."

The kindlier impulse shone in her face as, conscious at last of her scrutiny, Magda started and looked up. For a long minute they gazed at each other, inimical yet wistful too. Then with one of her swift movements Magda crossed the narrow space and sank on her knees by Sheila's side, clasping her friend's reluctant hands.

"Oh, my dear, be warned by me. Before it's too late!" Her voice was broken. "I'm older than you. I know the world. Crombie's friendship is dangerous."

Sheila drew back, alert, uneasy.

"I think you're exaggerating. You say you are still a friend of Philip's. Why shouldn't it be a parallel case?"

"Because the man's not worth it!" Magda spoke with a curious hardness. "You can't compare him with your husband."

"I don't wish to," retorted Sheila. "But you'll have to prove his worthlessness before I listen to any more."

"I will." Magda rose to her feet, for Sheila had withdrawn her hands. "That's why I asked you here to-day. I've guessed for weeks how things were shaping. I hate interference; I've held my tongue. But Philip's face yesterday——" She broke off. "It's my duty. You shall know what Crombie is. For if you wrecked your husband's career I'd never forgive you! Nor myself."

She drew up a low chair facing Sheila determinedly, her

shoulders bent a little forward, hands clasped round her knees. It was her favourite attitude when she was wrestling with a problem. Sheila watched her with cold attention. But in her heart was a thrill of excitement. She was going to fight Crombie's battle. Opposition had strengthened her love. Her old uncertainty had vanished. At that moment she would have gone gladly with him to the ends of the world.

"It's a long story," said Magda abruptly. "It dates back to the days of my childhood."

Sheila nodded.

"Take your time."

It was not meant for insolence. It held the supreme assurance of youth, which is the cruellest note of all in the ears of middle-age. Magda winced and her voice grew harder.

"I lived in a little village in Wales. A quiet place with few neighbours and no children of my class, save the vicar's two daughters. I was thrown back on them for friendship. They were both very pretty girls: Adela tall and dark, 'Midge'—as we used to call her—a little creature with fair hair and a sunny and confiding manner.

"Adela was discontented. She was fond of admiration even in her short frocks; a troublesome girl, always in mischief, a born flirt and most untruthful. When she became nineteen she met a summer visitor to whom she poured out her griefs, and eventually persuaded this lady to adopt her as a companion. They went back together to town. I had never cared for Adela, although she was my own age, but I was very fond of Midge. I think we were both relieved when she left. For a time the news of her was good; then the thunderbolt fell. She had eloped with the eldest son of her employer, deceiving the latter cruelly. The vicar, heart-broken, followed the pair. Eventually the delinquents were married. It seemed as if she had settled down, but two years later came the news of a fresh and disastrous scandal. She had left her husband and gone off with a richer victim, a middle-aged racing man called Lester." She paused. Sheila had echoed the name. "You know him?"

"No, but I've seen *her*. Once."

For out of the past, vividly, had risen the long-forgotten picture of Mrs. Lester on the river bank, dark-eyed, smiling at Sandy. She had marked a crisis in Sheila's girlhood, her first poignant disillusion. What could she have to do with Crombie? The "other Sandy." A swift suspicion shot through Sheila forebodingly. The two men had been acquainted.

Conscious of Magda's scrutiny, she added quickly:

"It's unimportant—merely a coincidence. Please go on with your story."

Mrs. Hill took up the thread.

"The divorce was a great grief to the vicar, though Lester afterwards gave her his name. Meanwhile Midge had become engaged to a man on leave from India, a distant cousin of her mother's. They were married, and she went back with him. I lost sight of her for a time until, after a serious illness, she returned to spend a year at home.

"I must tell you that Adela had been ostracized by her family, but the two sisters met in town, and there was a reconciliation. Midge went to stay at her flat. This is where Crombie comes in. He was a friend of the Lesters. He admired Midge, and haunted the place. Adela encouraged him. Eventually a party was formed to go to Biarritz for the winter. It dwindled down at the end to four. Adela and some man—whose name I forget, one of her conquests—Midge and, of course, Crombie. I believe Lester was with them at first, but he went off yachting—later. He gave his wife a free hand, was fast himself, I should imagine. They moved in rather an *outré* set."

She paused for breath. Sheila waited, tense, against the orange cushion. Dismay fought hard with loyalty, for part of the story was known to her. She could have easily supplied the name of Adela's companion. She could hear again Sandy's voice, in the quiet backwater, describing the gay quartette. He had dismissed the fellow-pair as "her sister and another chap." No wonder he had fought shy of Crombie after

the Crosskeys adventure! The pieces were fitting into place. And what was to come? She steadied her nerves.

Magda's voice began again. There was something relentless in her face. Sheila watched her distastefully.

"I met Midge in Rome, later. She was waiting there for her husband to join her, *via* Brindisi, for a short holiday together before they returned to India. I ran across her in the Corso, and she seemed overjoyed to see me, begged me to dine with her that night, complaining that she was lonely. I saw at a glance that she wasn't happy, and in her room before we parted she broke down and told me the reason. We had been girlhood friends, and I think she was glad to unburden her mind. I'm going to trust you with her secret." She frowned for a moment thoughtfully. "I hate betraying another woman. Still I think in this case I'm justified. You must promise me it will go no further?"

"Very well." Sheila assented. She added, as Magda hesitated, "I promise." Her lips felt parched, and the room seemed unbearably hot.

"She loved Crombie—and he had failed her." Magda spoke very distinctly. "Adela was always bad, Midge weak and easily led. Anyhow, I daren't judge her. Crombie is unscrupulous. He is a man who looks on women as fair game—married women. He's fascinating, in his way. You can guess how far this 'friendship' went. After her return to India a child was born—'prematurely.' This was her explanation. I never learnt what the husband thought; whether he knew and hushed it up on account of his position, or was deceived from start to finish. But I don't think there's the slightest doubt that Crombie was the child's father."

Sheila leaned a little forward, screening her face from the fire so that it lay in shadow.

"What was her name—her married name?"

"James. Why?"

There came no answer.

Magda gave her one glance, then looked away. Her task was done.

Sheila sat very still. She felt physically sick. She had trusted Crombie, believed in his friendship and in his respect for herself. He had brought this child to her house; Archie, with his blue eyes, knowing—— She clenched the hand that held the paper screen before her.

She had filled the gap left by Moyra!

The association of ideas was degrading. She saw herself placed in a class typified by Mrs. Lester. What bit deeper into her pride was her own humiliating error. Crombie had never meant the affair to be anything but a passing amusement. It had been passion, not love, herself a sentimental dupe.

But Magda had known better.

She hated Magda at that moment, sitting there so silently, waiting. For what? For another confession? Never! She got up hurriedly.

"I see. It's an unpleasant story. If there had been anything more than friendship between this man and myself I should have cause to feel annoyed. That's where you've been mistaken." She forced a smile. "As it is, I shall put the whole thing out of my mind. Your friend's secret is perfectly sa[illegible] I think it's time that I went now. Philip will be expecting me."

It was bravely done. Magda wondered, but she did not attempt to detain her guest.

"I hope you'll find your husband better." The social phrase filled the pause. It emphasized the gulf between them. Sheila carefully buttoned her gloves. There was a trace of embarrassment when they reached the outer door. After a moment's hesitation, Magda stooped for a parting kiss.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I *had* to do it. Don't bear me any malice."

An unwise speech. Sheila recoiled.

"Why should I?" Her voice was hard. "Naturally one dislikes to hear any attack upon a friend. But his private life does not concern me. I judge people as I find them." She added, rather cruelly, "I'll tell Philip you asked for him.

Perhaps you could spare half an hour to run in and cheer him up?"

Magda made no reply. A sudden memory was revived in the other, and she continued coolly:

"By the way, you mentioned something about my husband and money matters. That he was 'harassed,' I think you said. Did he tell you so himself?"

A faint colour stirred beneath the pallor of Magda's skin.

"Not precisely. He implied it. I know, of course, he has heavy expenses."

Sheila smiled.

"I'll see to it."

With this, and a farewell nod, she went down the long stone stairs.

Magda watched her. At the bend it was her friend's custom to turn and wave before she disappeared. But the little dark head was stiffly set. There was no weakening, backward glance. After a moment Magda heard her voice, clear and authoritative, bid the porter call a hansom, then the noise of the slammed door.

A cold wind blew up the stairs, and she went back into the flat, conscious of its loneliness. A feminine instinct drove her across to the mirror in her room. She studied her face sombrely, seeking for the marks of Time; the little wrinkles round the eyes, a wasting in the full throat that she had noticed in other women. But the years had been merciful. Out of the dim grey glass her perfect vitality shone forth like a tropical flower. Her lips quivered. Abruptly she spoke aloud:

"If I'd let her run away with Crombie, Philip would have turned to me. Now I've lost her friendship too." Bitterness overwhelmed her.

. . . . . .

With the window up, through the rain, Sheila drove. It lashed in, like cold fingers on her face. She welcomed it and the sharp east wind, for she was in the mood for battle. Its buffeting relieved her spirit.

To go back, like this, to Philip; play the part of a dutiful wife, wondering every minute if Crombie would call or telephone, and how she would answer him—her thoughts whirled on—it was horrible! The treachery—the humiliation! And how could she refuse to see him? There were the servants to consider. Write? Could she trust him with such a letter? Never.

She stared out into the street at the hurrying people on the pavement, their faces nipped with the cold. What a life it was: an eternal struggle! Those myriads of human souls, each in a world of his own, the centre of it, yet driven blindly by the force of circumstance. Seeking—for what? Happiness. Her lips curled in self-contempt.

In the crowd, loitering, came a pair, a boy and girl, clinging together unashamed, his thin arm thrust through hers, their ungloved hands tightly clasped, a fatuous smile on their faces. Sheila wondered. Was that love—or merely the hot desire of youth? Had she ever loved Crombie? She flushed, with the memory of his kiss; of what it had meant, and her own weakness.

On a news-sheet, as she passed, she saw for a headline the latest divorce. Over her swept a feeling of panic. It might have been her own name that stared out in leaded type: "Wife of a Member of Parliament."

For a man like Crombie, who lived lightly and believed supremely in personal freedom, she had risked the shattering of her pride. She saw that her old sterner notions had been modified by association with the Craiks and undermined by the loneliness imposed by Philip. Not only Cara but Mrs. Lester had provided advertisement for the papers!

Yet Cara's case was different. She could not bracket the mother of Mick with Adela and her sister. Then where did morality come in? Was it an expedience for safeguarding Society, or a divine institution?

She had travelled far these last months to arrive at this new debatable ground. She seemed to have lost all her bearings.

"It's only the shock that has pulled me up," she said to

herself bitterly. "I was drifting deliberately. Cara, at least, looked ahead and counted the cost. I closed my eyes."

The memory of her cousin persisted, and when she entered the narrow hall and found a telegram lying there, almost before she opened it she guessed it was from the Windmill Farm. She read it through with puzzled brows, for the meaning, at first, escaped her. Then she gave a faint smile.

"How like Cara! I'd forgotten. If Philip's well enough, I'll go. It will make a break, anyhow! I shall feel stronger on my return to see Crombie and say good-bye. But I *dread* it." She stared down absently at the message. The pencilled words became blurred; tears welled up into her eyes.

She was quite unconscious of their presence. Indeed, the telegram called for laughter. Very distinct, in a clerkly hand, the quaint invitation ran:

"Bear caged do come this week end bring warm clothes Cara."

For against the mottled slip of paper Crombie's face had risen up, handsome, compelling, and in her ears his quickened speech found an echo, full of a passionate note of pleading:

"Give me—your charity!"

She screwed the telegram into a ball and flung it from her.

"*Charity!*" All her resentment blazed forth. "I'd like to kill him," she said hotly.

PART IV

THE EMPTY ROAD

CHAPTER XVII

"DON'T be long," said Cara gaily, "and, whatever you change into, don't be smart!" She left Sheila to her unpacking, mindful of Mick and his devotions.

In the room with its sloping ceiling was a faint scent of lavender from a muslin bag in the open wardrobe, and over all was the clean and crisp freshness of the countryside. Sheila drew aside the curtain and peered out into the dark. Against the sky, alight with stars, the windmill hung like a giant moth that had fluttered into a white world. For the rain of London had given place to a thin, frosty film of snow as the train approached the edge of the downs, leaving the winding river behind, cold and grey among the woods that were desolate with their bare branches.

She had caught a glimpse of the Gate House, its cunning eaves like the ears of a rat, and the long, low wall that bordered the garden. It brought a sudden pain to her heart, and the vision uprose of her mother moving down the gravel path, her basket slung upon her arm, scissors in her gloved hands, intent on flowers for the table. So fair and serene and so detached from all outside her chosen realm, exacting her family's respect, accepting love and praise as her due, complete—so it seemed to Sheila—and far beyond the reach of temptation.

The wistful memory brought with it a faint envy, which she resisted.

For had her mother ever lived in the fullest sense, lived intensely? Was evasion of all evil in itself a virtue—or selfishness? To know was to understand. In the pitiful compre-

hension of the sin and suffering of the world, where the way was not smoothed by love and kindness, lay the germs of a broader sympathy, a universal brotherhood. Had her mother achieved this aim through her blind purity?

Loyalty forbade reply. But there came to Sheila an odd comfort.

Leaning out of the open window she drew a deep breath of the magical air that swept across the open downs. It seemed to cleanse her, body and soul; to restore her lost spiritual balance. Her thoughts ran back to the past week, to linger at last round Magda's name. She felt a newborn touch of remorse.

The rising wind stirred the pines, and in the silence she could hear the creaking of the stiff branches, as they pointed to the night sky, grim sentinels of the mill.

Had she been unjust to Magda? For Magda had suffered too. She was a very lonely woman, and one who loved with no hope of return. It must have hurt her to confess. How strange it was! For a man like Philip.

Sheila shivered and closed the window. She could not reach a decision yet, but already in her troubled heart the seeds of forgiveness had taken root.

Cara's voice sounded outside.

"Come and kiss Mick good night. He won't sleep unless you do. Visitors are an event." She poked her head round the door. "Why, you naughty child, you're not dressed, and it's close upon the dinner hour."

"I've only got to slip into this." Sheila was struggling with a tea-gown. "I've been having a look at the mill. It's so deliciously peaceful here."

"You were meant for a country life." Cara smiled and came closer. "I find it a little *too* peaceful at times!" Her busy fingers began to hook the gap between neck and waist. "You're thinner. Is that dissipation?"

"Worry!" But Sheila laughed on the word. It was so good to be far away from the cause of it, and from Philip.

Mick was sitting up in his cot, wide-eyed and expectant.

At his feet was a fat pig, roughly carved from a block of wood, squat on its haunches and painted pink with a broad belly-band of black.

"'Berkshire Blobs,'" Cara explained. "Val made it yesterday. It really was an inspiration, as Mick had a cold and couldn't go out. I don't think, after all, you'd better kiss him. You might catch it."

"Nonsense!" Sheila bent down and drew the eager little figure, so warm and vital, into her arms.

Mick hugged her, then giggled.

"You *tittled* me!" He squirmed away. "I'm tittle-ish. So's Nanny. On Sunday evening, down the lane, I saw Joe tittling her neck with a straw, and she said——"

The nurse interposed quickly, her face flushed.

"Now, Master Mick, if you go on like that you'll never sleep. Such nonsense!"

Luckily Mick was diverted from his candid reminiscences by the sound of footsteps outside.

"Val! Val!" he cried shrilly.

"Hullo!" A head came round the corner with thick, rough hair and brown eyes. "Why aren't you in the land of Nod? I'll give you——" The speaker paused, aware, too late, of Sheila's presence. He was backing out cautiously when Cara stopped him.

"Don't go. Come in and be introduced." He obeyed unwillingly. Cara looked mischievous. "Tim's cousin—*my* cousin!" She waved her hand between the pair. "Doesn't that make you two related?"

"I don't think so." Sheila smiled. Logue had hastily shaken her hand and dropped it as though the contact burnt him. She thought of Crombie's warm clasp and bit back the memory, studying the man before her.

He was very like his photograph: big and loose-limbed, with the same obstinate set of the chin; not handsome, yet redeemed from mediocrity by his eyes, dark and deep-set, that met hers and looked away immediately, as though he resented any guess-work by a woman of the thoughts behind.

There came a moment's awkward silence as Logue stood there, taciturn. Then Cara, still amused, threw herself into the breach.

"Has Tim returned? With the car. What did Hibbert say about it?"

Logue answered the volley of questions, ticking them off on a long first finger, the tip blunt and turned back.

"Tim has returned. Without the car. We walked." He spoke solemnly. "Hibbert was too abstruse for me to gather the precise disease. Atrophy of the carburettor, I suggest. Is that possible? Anyhow, it's in hospital. For a week. Tim was deeply annoyed."

"I don't wonder. It's maddening!" Cara pouted at the news. "Just as Sheila has come to stay. I'd set my heart on driving her over the downs to Albrey to-morrow." She turned to her cousin. "That's the village you wanted to see beyond the hill in that snapshot which I showed you. I'd even ordered lunch at the inn. I thought it would make a little change, and that we could potter round the place. I must let them know" She frowned, perplexed.

"I'm going to walk there myself to-morrow," Logue announced. "If I started early I could easily explain. I promised Trehearne I'd call in and look at his cottage. There's trouble with a leaking roof. If it comes to the worst"—he smiled at Mick, who was trying to catch his attention—"I'll eat the lunch. Eh, Mick? Develop a figure like Blobs and then get some one to roll me home."

Mick choked with delight.

"Fat!" He spread out his chubby arms. "Fat as *that*! 'Stick pin in, him go bustum'!"

Logue laughed heartily, pretending to spar with the little fellow.

Sheila, watching his face, was surprised at the quick change in it. The strong white teeth lit up his dark, weather-beaten skin; there were kindly lines round the firm mouth. For a moment the man was good-looking. Then, conscious of her gaze, he fidgeted and the scowl returned.

Cara was still immersed in her problem.

"I think I'd better wire early. It's too late to write now. And you can explain more fully, Val. Anyhow, you'll find some food. You'll want it, after a tramp, this weather." She had a sudden inspiration. "I suppose it would be too far for Sheila? I know she wants to see Albrey."

Logue looked taken aback. Then, rather maliciously and feeling that he was perfectly safe from unwelcome companionship, he appeared to consider it.

"I shouldn't think so. It depends. Of course, for a *Londoner*"—he gave Sheila a sidelong glance which she resented, guessing his thoughts—"it might seem a fair step. It's six miles as the crow flies; seven or more by the road."

Little he knew the girl before him. To dare Sheila was to provoke all her old sporting instincts.

"I'm good for that," she replied demurely.

She was rewarded by his expression. He did not attempt to hide his dismay.

Cara laughed and turned to her cousin.

"Then it's settled! If you're sure you're up to it?" She wanted the pair to be friends, and here was the means to throw them together. "Don't ask me to make a third. I draw the line at twelve miles. There goes the gong!" She bent over Mick. "Good night, sonny. Go to sleep. You mustn't keep poor Blobs awake." Lovingly she drew up the blanket round his chubby shoulders, smoothing back the ruffled curls, and kissed him again, her face tender.

Logue made a last attempt to wriggle out of the tight corner.

"It's rough going," he said to Sheila. His eyes were fixed on her little feet in their dainty satin slippers. "Not easy with high heels."

It verged on rudeness. For a second she felt inclined to draw back. But that meant victory to him.

"I've brought strong boots." Her voice was careless. "I'm very fond of a good tramp." With a last wave of her hand to Mick she led the way to the stairs. Tim met her in the hall.

"Oh, there you are! I heard you'd arrived. It *is* nice to see you again." He spoke in his eager boyish way, with the merry tilt of his upper lip over his slightly prominent teeth. "Looking ripping. Yes—I *must*!" He kissed her cheek heartily. "Dash it all, you're a cousin now."

Cara scolded him from the stairs.

"Tim! I really won't allow it."

"Why not? You kiss Val. And I know Sheila doesn't mind."

"*How* do you know?" she laughed back.

"Because, if you did, you'd box my ears. You don't stick at trifles, do you? I remember your snubbing that poor boy—what was his name? Lance something—in those jolly days on the river. I felt very sympathetic. I was badly hit myself at the time." He steered her into the seat on his right and glanced at Logue opposite. His eyes twinkled. "The dear old bear," he thought. "I'll bet he's planning a bolt. He's furious that Sheila's come. I shall have to take a high hand with him." Out aloud he said to his wife, "Hibbert was at his worst to-day; pessimistic and non-committal. I wanted to bring the car back—risk it for the week-end—but he drew such a lurid picture of the dangers confronting us that he frightened Val into caution. As a matter of fact he prefers walking. He doesn't think of my game leg. Selfish, these old bachelors!"

Logue refused to be drawn. He drank his soup in glum silence. After a little he looked up.

"How long does it take to get chimneys swept?"

Cara gave way to open mirth.

"It depends on how many. *And* the sweep! Why?"

Logue explained glibly:

"They're my chimneys. The mater's coming to stay with me, over Christmas, and Mrs. Bean, when she heard the news, dissolved into tears. She's an awful woman! Worse than the last. *She* drank. But I'd sooner have that any day than this one's passion for spring-cleaning. It seems that the soot was falling about, and she said no cooking could be done. That's

all nonsense, isn't it? Also that I must clear out and give her a free hand. With the connivance of the sweep." He added ingenuously, "That's why I came to you. But heaven knows the havoc she'll play in the studio 'getting straight.' It's her gentle euphemism for putting things back in the wrong places."

"With no respect," Tim suggested, "for the 'patina of age.' In other words, for honest dust."

"None." Logue agreed too quickly. "Oh, well, of course there's dust, *and* dust! It's bad for the pictures to stir it up. But what about those chimneys now?" He turned to Cara.

She nodded gravely.

"How many do you possess?" She caught Tim's urgent grimace. He had realized Val's intention.

"Six or seven. I'm not sure. One appears to be a twin."

"Then I think Mrs. Bean will require a full week." She was pleased with her diplomacy. "You can't trifle with sooty chimneys. If you hurry her it will make things worse."

"A week?" Logue's jaw dropped. "I thought I ought to be off to-morrow, just to keep an eye on things."

"She might trifle with the twin," Tim suggested heartlessly. Out of the corner of his eye he watched the parlour-maid disappear; then he gave vent to his indignation. "If you're sick of being here, old chap, why don't you find a better excuse? Any child could see through that one."

"I'm not," Logue stammered. His hand swept out in a gesture of denial, the thumb flattened as though he effaced a defective line in a picture. "But I'm worried. I've got a sitter waiting."

"That's better," Tim mocked. "We can all understand a love of money. Try again."

Logue scowled. After a moment, to Sheila's surprise, he threw back his head and laughed; laughed till the tears stood in his eyes.

"I've got it!" He would say no more, except that the sweep might do his worst.

"Or his best," said Tim wickedly. "You ought to allow

Mrs. Bean a day to spring-clean herself, over and above the house."

"She's quite respectable." Logue sighed. "That's why she's difficult to live with. I mean," he added hurriedly, "she's so suspicious of every one. I had to speak to her severely about her manner to the models. One of them cut up rough, half-way through a picture too. Luckily, the mater was present. She took the girl out to lunch at a restaurant and smoothed her down. And there, at the next table was Ralph, with a smart party. He couldn't think whom the mater had picked up. You can picture how she enjoyed herself."

"She would." Tim was delighted. "But Ralph?"

"He came round, later on, and held a court of inquiry. The mater said she was testing the girl as a future wife for me. Very sweetly—you know her way? That was about the climax!"

Sheila laughed. Logue gave a little start at the clear note. He had plainly forgotten her presence, carried away by his story. Instinctively she had guessed that the reason for his proposed departure had been connected with herself. Now his attitude confirmed it. He shut up like an oyster. She was tempted for the second time to withdraw from the walk next day, but Cara clinched the matter.

"Then, since you aren't tired of us and we've settled the problem of the chimneys, you'll do that errand for me at Albrey?"

Without waiting for his answer, she explained the matter to her husband. It left Logue no loophole. Tim wisely restrained his amusement.

"Capital! I'd come too, but I'm off long walks at present, since I crocked up my knee. Don't you go killing Sheila." He looked at Logue. He was rather suspicious of what the latter's laugh had concealed.

"I've told Mrs. Antrobus how far it is," said his cousin stiffly.

"And warned me against high heels," Sheila reminded him. Her voice was a shade supercilious. Her blue eyes un-

flatteringly surveyed Logue. To her surprise she saw the blood steal up under the man's bronzed skin; the hand that held his wineglass shook.

"Why," she thought, "he's desperately shy! It's not churlishness so much as actual fear of a stranger."

The enlightenment brought a touch of pity. She changed the trend of the conversation, and, for the rest of the meal, devoted herself to her host. But she felt Logue watching her aggressively as Cara chattered.

. . . . . .

When she came down next morning she found the artist in the hall poring over a road map.

"Studying our route?" she asked.

He jumped and looked up guiltily.

"No—yes. That is to say, there's a short cut I haven't tried—a sheep track that saves a mile. I stumbled across it last summer when I was staying over at Albrey. A map is always fascinating." His quick glance ran over her with a kind of grudging approval.

It took in the rough tweed skirt, thick-shod boots, the white sweater, rolled at her throat, and, above this, the vivid and clear-skinned face. She had slept well, and no shadows lay beneath the wide, dark-lashed eyes, blue as the sky over the hills where the morning mists were rolling back.

With a nod she passed him, to be greeted by Tim in the dining-room. He chaffed her on her appearance.

"Ready for the Marathon? Look at her, Cara. Isn't she sporting?"

"You'll want a thick coat," said her cousin. "The wind's in the north, and although it's sunny you'll find it bitterly cold on the hills."

Sheila temporized.

"No, I'll wear my old golf cape. It's much easier to walk in. Besides"—she laughed—"it has a hood which will come in useful if it snows!" She remembered the careless words later.

"Oh, it won't snow to-day," said Tim.

"I'm not so sure." It was Logue's voice.

"Are you backing out?" Tim jeered. He turned to Sheila. "He's afraid that you will walk him off his legs."

"A 'Londoner'?" She glanced at the artist.

"Well, aren't you?" Logue retorted.

"Only by adoption," she countered.

He nodded indifferently.

"If you two start sparring at this hour, by the time you've climbed up to Widdingby Camp you won't have any breath left. Who says ham and eggs?" The host busied himself with the breakfast.

"That's one thing I never do; talk when I'm on the tramp." Logue spoke pointedly.

"You sound a cheerful companion." Tim chuckled, watching the pair.

Sheila was taking a silent vow to equal Logue's taciturnity. Cara looked a shade troubled. She decided to take Logue aside and lecture him before the start. Then, uncertain, abandoned the plan. In friendship, she knew that interference rarely helped. They must fight it out. To extol one person to another was the way to arouse antipathy in the normal Briton. It infringed his liberty of opinion. But she wondered if she had been wise in proposing the adventure.

She would have doubted it still more had she seen them, a few hours later, grimly striding side by side over the short stubbly turf that crackled with frost beneath their boots.

For the last two miles hardly a word had passed between them. Every minute the silence became more calculated. The sun was now veiled by clouds stealing across from the horizon where, heavily packed in white masses, they looked like layers of cotton wool. The cold was intense; it stiffened their cheeks and interfered with their breathing powers. Logue had offered Sheila the choice of route on starting, and she had voted for the downs, disdaining the high road. He had already counted on this. Now she began to regret it. The rough ground tired her feet, and the desolation of the scene brought with it a note of depression. They seemed

miles from civilization. They were mounting a stiff upward slope and suddenly Sheila halted.

"Tired?" His voice sounded hopeful.

"No." She had turned and was staring behind her. "Are you sure we're going right?"

Logue did not answer her at once, and she went on:

"That clump of trees"—she pointed to a circular patch crowning a hill in the distance—"was on our *left* when we passed the ridge of the Roman Camp. I don't understand it. We seem to be moving in a circle." Her eyes came back to his solemn face, and her new suspicion quickened. She dived down into her pocket and drew out a small compass that was attached to her watch. "We're heading due south," she noted. "I thought that Albrey lay to the north?"

"It does." He gave a short laugh. "I think, somehow, I've missed my bearings."

With an effort Sheila controlled her temper. She chose a patch of rocky ground and sat down, her back to the wind, her eyes surveying the desolate waste.

"Have you *any* idea where we are?" Her voice was scornful. She was sure that Logue had planned this misadventure. It explained his laughter overnight.

"Not much," he admitted. "We ought to have turned off by the quarry, but I thought this was that short cut I was hunting up in the map. I'm afraid I've made a hash of things. We shall have to retrace our steps to the commencement of the sheep track. From there it's an easy distance home."

"Home?" The plot was clear now. He had led her round in a circle, hoping to tire her out and to take her back to the Windmill Farm, continuing his walk alone. "*You* can go home, if you like. I'm going on to Albrey."

He stared at her.

"You don't understand. We're thoroughly off the beaten track. It will mean at least five miles more when we get back to the quarry."

"Well?" Her chin was obstinate. "I'm going to Albrey,

whatever happens. I can find my way by the road. Unless" —she levelled the compass again, caught by the daring notion—"I stick to the downs. If I bear straight east I'm bound to strike the road somewhere. That's what I'll do." She rose to her feet, ignoring the struggle in Logue's face, his dismay and unwilling admiration.

"You can't! You'll get lost on the downs."

She shrugged her shoulders and started off.

"Mrs. Antrobus!" He was after her. As she made no sign, in his desperation he put out his hand and clutched her cape. She was brought to a halt, flushed and furious.

"I shall." Her eyes challenged him.

"All right. I'm coming with you."

"There's no need. I'd rather not."

"Please?" It sounded strange on his lips.

She realized that she had conquered.

"Do you *want* to come?"

He nodded his head.

"I've led you astray. I'm sorry—now."

The honesty of the added word appealed to her. Her resentment wavered.

"Purposely?" She saw again that dull flush invade his skin, but he looked back unflinchingly.

"Yes."

She laughed.

"I thought so! I knew you resented acting as guide. But you put me on my mettle, you know, when you called me 'a Londoner.'"

"Was that it?" A slow smile broadened his lips. He hesitated.

The wind caught at her loose cape and sent it swirling up between them. Indistinctly behind the folds she heard him murmur something about being "a fool"—"might have guessed." It was a clumsy apology.

Her face, rosy from exercise and inward laughter, emerged at last from the clinging tangle of tweed.

"Ah!" she breathed, relieved to be free. "I'll forgive

you—when we get to Albrey! I don't think I played fair, either. I saw you didn't want me to come."

"You mean that?" He thrust out his hand impulsively. "You'll cry quits? I don't deserve it. If you knew! The fact is—I'm a regular hermit. I'm of no social use whatever."

His jerky confession and the grip of his fingers, no longer half-hearted, completed Sheila's understanding. Their old enmity had vanished.

"At Albrey, I said." Her eyes danced. "I reserve my full pardon till then."

"You're sure it won't be too far?"

"Not in this gorgeous air. I could walk for miles. Even in silence."

He detected the malice in the words. His laugh rang out boyishly.

"Come on, then! You see that hill?" He stretched out his arm. "The one with the clump of trees on the top. In the valley behind is the Roman road. It leads to Albrey. I think, now, it's our shortest way. It's a tidy distance, but we ought to get there in time for a late lunch."

"Good." She smiled, satisfied.

They fell into step. She walked well, accustomed to long tramps with her father. From time to time disjointedly Logue addressed her, pointing out the beauties of the rolling scene, darkened by shadows from the clouds or startlingly clear in a burst of sunshine.

She listened to him, interested; learning the values of light and shade as he became more technical, and seeking for colour where hitherto her untrained eye had discovered nothing but a blurred neutrality. At last they reached the long white road. It stretched like a ribbon, drawn taut across the land with the iron purpose of the race that had built it, inflexible, steering straight for the far-off goal.

Logue gave rein to his fancy, conjuring up the marching legions and peopling Widdingby Camp above, its sentinel watching the cloud of dust, chalk-white, roll up and dissolve as the last gleam of spears vanished in a fold of the downs.

His talked veered round from this to books and another tramp that scorned turnings.

"Never read *The Road to Rome*? Oh, you must. I'll lend it you." He added simply, "That is, if you'll promise to return it."

"Of course." Sheila hid her amusement.

"People don't, you know," said Logue. "There's no morality round books, and this one is an old friend. It's not the value—it cost a shilling—but a new one wouldn't be the same. I've always planned to follow the route myself one day. It's difficult, though, to get away from one's work for more than a week or two."

He drifted on happily, describing his studio life under Sheila's tactful questions. Then, more shyly, he spoke of his mother.

"She doesn't live with me, you see. We share her. I've five brothers. She's the best companion in the world—not a bit like a woman."

Sheila smiled at this naïve tribute.

"In what way?"

"She doesn't fuss or ask questions. She lets us alone—always has done. A bit strict about the Sabbath, but otherwise nothing matters. And she doesn't force this down our throats, just likes her prejudice respected. She's the sort of woman who's really religious but can't bear curates. You understand?"

"I do." Sheila's blue eyes twinkled. "And you?" She glanced at his stubborn face, risking the question.

He answered simply.

"In a different way. I avoid church. It doesn't suit my temperament. Too much patter and show about it. But I thank God every hour for this beautiful world, and I try to live—well, as straight as I can. That's about all. I suppose it isn't much of a creed."

"I don't know." She became thoughtful.

For a little time they swung on in silence, each absorbed in the train of ideas the speech had started, until Logue glanced

up at the sky, and a frown replaced his look of abstraction. For the weather had changed. The puffed white clouds were coming closer, and overhead a darker one drooped, ominous, with a pale copper-coloured border, the farewell gleam of the vanquished sun.

Suddenly Sheila put up her hand. A flake of snow had touched her cheek. Others came softly in its wake. She looked at Logue. He nodded grimly.

"I'm afraid we're in for it," he said. "But it's no good turning back. It's much nearer now to Albrey. Is that cape waterproof?"

"Rather! *I* don't mind. Wait a second." She began to draw the hood forward over her head. "I said that this would come in useful!"

"You did." Logue smiled, relieved by her cheerful philosophy.

The air was full of whirling flakes. The wind drove the snow in their faces, and impeded their movements as they mounted. Sheila became a little breathless. Logue tucked a hand through her arm rather roughly.

"You don't mind? It will help you up the hill."

"I'm grateful," she answered gaily. She knew that the action had cost him an effort.

On they went, shoulder to shoulder, fighting against the coming blizzard.

"You might be a boy," he said abruptly.

"I wish I were."

"Why?" He was curious.

"Because men have a better time. They can live as they like without interference." She ducked to escape a gust of wind, and drove on with lowered head.

"Can't women?" he asked simply.

"No. They're more tied. It's difficult."

"Isn't that a theory wholly dependent on convention?"

"Explain." She was panting a little.

He slackened the pace, noting this.

"I meant in all that actually matters. One's inner life.

The external things don't really count much. Not other people and their opinions. They can have no tyranny over the mind. It's the thoughts one builds up for oneself, and the fresh beauty one discovers that make each day a new adventure. Of course that's an artist's point of view. To live through the eyes and the finer senses, and create. All else palls before it."

"But supposing you weren't your own master? I'll picture a case." She wrinkled her brows. "Say you were forced to support your mother, and couldn't do it by your art; that the only course open to you was a clerkship in the city—the daily grind and association with people utterly distasteful. How could you rise above that?"

"I shouldn't look on it as my life—not my real life. Ever read Richard Jefferies? He recommends us to 'think outside and beyond our present circle of ideas.' Of course I should work when I was at it, but out of hours I should be myself. I wouldn't let it affect my soul. There's beauty calling everywhere, even in the city streets, if only one's eyes are opened. Wonderful shades of light and colour, opal mystery in the fog, pale old bricks, struggling trees, and the river, eternally renewed, with its dark waters and its shipping." His voice grew dreamy; he stared ahead. "The trouble is that people miss so much happiness at their feet, and are ashamed of imagination. They won't build up a world for themselves. They're too much afraid of solitude."

Sheila wondered. She couldn't speak. The storm was now full upon them. Logue came back to the present.

"Let's halt for a breather." He pulled up in the lee of a straggling hedge.

Before them stretched another hill, steep and stony, apparently endless, framed on each side by the open downs. Sheila gave a little start as she recognized the desolate scene. It was the setting of her picture. She felt a sudden thrill of excitement. Now she would know what lay beyond the brow of The Empty Road. She was nearing the heart of the mystery.

She became aware that the man beside her had stripped the coat from his broad shoulders, laying it on the snowy bank.

"Sit down for a minute." He forced himself backward into the hedge, sheltering as best he could.

"You mustn't. You'll catch your death of cold," she protested, horrified.

"Not I." He laughed at her. "I never catch cold. I'm weather-proof. Besides, I've got on a flannel shirt." He surveyed it lovingly as he squatted upon his heels. "Nice colour, isn't it?"

It was a much-faded blue, and it showed a rent at the elbow. A sudden memory of Crombie, so immaculate in his dress, rose up in Sheila's mind, and she thrust it away contemptuously. Logue had gained by the contrast.

"Sit down." His voice was stern.

She saw that he was looking vexed, and curled herself up obediently, on the rough tweed coat, shaking the snow from off her hood, and thankful for the slight shelter of the stunted blackthorn, warped by the wind.

"You look like a Capuchin monk," he said. He stared at her, closed his eyes, then opened them, to catch her amazement. "Visualizing," he explained.

"What's that?"

"Oh, don't you know? It's a lovely game." He slapped his hands, blue with cold, cheerfully against his knees. "When you see anything you like or want to remember afterwards"—this ingenuous remark made her smile—"you take a mental photograph. It needs practice to conquer the detail. But it's ripping, at odd moments when you're bored or depressed, to switch on mentally some happy scene, and get away from the present. I believe even you would find it useful, say at a dull dinner-party! Try. Just look at me—a bad subject, but think I'm a poacher—and get the lines into your head. Then the main colouring. This hedge, for instance, dark underneath and powdered with snow, and my blue shirt."

She obeyed him, amusement gaining on her. Now that the wall was down between them, his naturalness was disarming. He stared back.

"There's cobalt in your hair."

Her laugh rang out.

"And I can see little flecks of yellow in your eyes."

"That's right." He beamed at her. "Now, look away and tot up all that remains in your memory. And then——" He checked himself, listening. "I believe I can hear wheels."

The next moment he was out on the open road, his face eager, indifferent to the wild blizzard.

Sheila scrambled up after him.

"Put this on!" She held out the coat. He drove one arm into it, his eyes glued to the top of the hill, striving to pierce the flurry of snow. "Now, the other—there you are!" It was like being with Rex again.

"Thanks." He turned up the collar. "What luck! It's a covered van. We'll get them to give us a lift back."

"Back?" He heard the disappointment ring out in her voice. "But I did want to see Albrey."

A sense of being foiled anew drove away weariness and prudence. Was she never to reach the promised land, beyond the brow of the hill?

He glanced at her, hesitating.

"It's for you to decide."

Her face brightened.

"Then we'll go on."

Down the slope came the steady rumble, drawing closer. Logue watched her, sorely puzzled. Why was she keen to continue the walk under the present trying conditions? Was it mere obstinacy?

"It's not only getting to Albrey, it's getting back," he suggested. "Supposing the snow lasted all day we might have to stay the night. There's no station; it's off the line. And Cara would be worrying."

"I see." Sheila bit her lip. It did not seem to occur to him that for them to put up at the inn together was an un-

conventional proceeding. But the possibility settled her doubts.

"Well, perhaps you're wise." She gave in. "I think we'd better go home."

"Sure?" Logue studied her face.

"Quite. I hadn't thought of Cara."

"All right." He moved to meet the van which loomed up out of the mist. The driver, surprised, checked the horses.

Logue explained the situation whilst Sheila patted the steaming necks of the patient animals. They were sleek, for it was a brewer's conveyance, and malt was not unknown to them.

"Then you'll drop us at the cross-roads, just above the old windmill," she heard Logue say, the deal concluded.

They scrambled up and settled down among the barrels thankfully. But the snow still drifted in from the rear. Logue proceeded to put this right. He fished out a tarpaulin and rigged it up as a screen.

"You hold that end, I'll hold this." He drew it forward over their heads. "That keeps the draught away."

Shoulder to shoulder they sat and talked under this improvised tent, as the springless wheels bumped over the ground, happy as a pair of children playing the deathless game of "Pirates."

It seemed doubly strange to Sheila. London belonged to another world. That London where Crombie lived and to which she must return so soon. She gave an involuntary sigh. Logue glanced sideways at her.

"I'm afraid it's a bit jolty," he said. "Are you getting stiff?"

"It's not that. I was thinking how short my holiday was." The admission slipped from her lips.

"Well, think instead that you're jogging along into some wonderful adventure. Don't you ever build castles in the air?"

"No. I used to." She looked away.

"And weren't you happy then?" he persisted.

She nodded.

"Yes. But I was a child."

"One needs them more as one grows older." Logue's voice was unusually gentle. "They shield us from our disillusions. Life at its best is a struggle towards attainment. We never arrive. Not to those heights that live in our dreams. Still, without these we might just as well be soulless —mere animals. That's where imagination helps us. I suppose it's rather impertinent for me to be giving you advice." He was drawing back into his shell.

"It isn't. Don't talk like that!" She spoke like the Sheila of childhood days, annoyed with some schoolboy companion.

"The fact is," said Logue, relieved by her friendly attitude, "I'm not accustomed to being with women, and I always put my foot in it."

She nearly said "Thank heaven!" For her mind had flown back to Crombie. There were men who knew her sex *too* well.

CHAPTER XVIII

CHRISTMAS had come and gone, bringing the usual gaiety and that curious speeding up of Time which seems to herald a new year. It had brought, too a definite rupture in Sheila's relations with Crombie and a parting scene, both painful and humiliating, which still haunted her. She could not betray Magda's confidences even had she wished to do so. It was difficult to frame a reason, with the memory of her own weakness, for terminating their close friendship. But she went through it doggedly and tried, though with less success, to thrust Crombie from her thoughts. He left a big gap in her life.

Meanwhile Philip had achieved another long-coveted project. Through Cranston's influence he had been offered a Parliamentary Secretaryship, the half-way house to higher ambitions. It brought a certain increase in their income, but Philip became more trying than ever, flattered in his self-esteem.

Sheila's life moved on steadily in the old channels, though her growing social activities left little time for Suffrage work. Magda had deserted London for a tour round the provinces. There had been no reconciliation. The Windmill Farm seemed far away and Sheila had almost forgotten Logue when he was brought forcibly into her circle of thought again.

She was making her way downstairs, dressed for a busy evening commencing with a political dinner, when Horton appeared. She was rather mysterious.

"There's a gentleman at the door, m'm, a Mr. Low, would like to see you. I asked him to come up, but he said he would rather wait there."

"Low?" Sheila looked puzzled. "At this hour? What is he like?"

"I couldn't say, m'm." Horton was prim. She resented any form of departure from conventional observances. "I thought it was the piano-tuner, at first, m'm. About the head. He's brought some books for you, he says."

"Oh——" Sheila's face lightened. "*Logue?* I know now."

"Yes, m'm, I said Logue." She would never own to a mistake.

"Very well. You needn't wait." Sheila went to the head of the stairs and peered down into the hall.

A big shadowy figure stood there leaning against the narrow table. He was reading peacefully. She gave an irrepressible laugh. Logue started and raised his eyes.

"Do come up," she called gaily.

He closed the book regretfully.

"I mustn't stop. Here's *The Road to Rome* and *The Ballade of the White Horse.* You'll like that. It's about the downs." He began to mount the narrow steps, looking about him nervously as though he suspected some trap, still clinging to his hat. Her warm welcome reassured him.

"It's so nice of you to bring them. I didn't think you'd remember."

"Of course. But I've been busy lately." His eyes ran over her and narrowed, full of artistic appreciation. For she made a very charming picture against the dark panelled walls. She was wearing her wedding-dress, brought up to date, the white satin veiled by some parchment-coloured lace that had been left her by her mother. It enhanced her clear colouring and gave her height. Her beautiful arms were bare, her burnished hair bound closely by a little wreath of laurel leaves.

"I like that. It's classical." Logue made a swift gesture as though sketching the lines of her head. His voice was absent as he resumed, "I should like to paint you. Just as ou are."

Sheila smiled, inwardly pleased. She knew that his praise

was sincere; it was no idle compliment. It aroused, too, a fresh notion.

"Well, why not?" Her face was eager. "I've been trying to think of some gift for my father. It's his birthday the month after next. And he has always wanted a portrait to hang on the other side of my mother's. The question is, if there's time? Also"—she hesitated—"if you really care to do it?"

"I should love to." He spoke abruptly. "How long it would take is another matter. That depends on yourself and the number of sittings you can give me. I always prefer to paint quickly. It depends, too, on the size."

Sheila nodded. Another question had arisen in her mind. She wondered what his terms would be. He read the doubt upon her face.

"I should suggest a three-quarter's length so as to include your arms." He stated the cost and smiled to himself as he saw her relief. He had reduced his usual price in his genuine desire to paint her. "When could you begin?" he asked.

She thought for a moment.

"Thursday morning? Would that suit you? I'm afraid I'm engaged most afternoons."

"Capitally. The light's better. At eleven o'clock? My mother's with me, so she could act as lady's maid if you preferred to change at my place."

"Then I won't bring Horton. To chaperon me!" She looked at him mischievously. She knew his contempt for conventions.

Logue's brown eyes twinkled.

"Is that the angular princess who let me in? She frightened me. And I'm sure she was nervous about the umbrellas. I'm afraid it *is* rather late, but it was my only chance of coming. Am I keeping you?" He held out the books. "You'll enjoy these—they're worth reading—and we'll discuss them during the sittings."

"*May* I talk?" She looked surprised.

"Why, of course!" His happy laugh rang out. "Did you think you sat there like a dummy?"

"I wasn't sure," Sheila confessed. A memory returned to her. "I know you dislike conversation whilst *walking*." A dimple stole into her cheek. "The same rule might apply to painting."

"Am I never to be forgiven?" he asked, amused.

She shook her head.

"Not until we get to Albrey. Don't you remember the conditions?"

He was about to answer her when the door of the study opened and Philip emerged. In evening clothes he looked shrunken. Latterly he had begun to stoop a little and he showed the strain of overwork.

Sheila introduced Logue.

"A cousin of Captain Craik's," she added.

Philip, plainly self-absorbed, was coldly polite. There followed a pause, in which he glanced up at the clock. Logue beat a hurried retreat.

"I'll come down with you," said Sheila. She turned to her husband. "I'm quite ready. Will you tell Horton to whistle a hansom?"

On the stairs she explained to Logue.

"We're dining out and going on to a couple of parties afterwards. But I'd far sooner settle down to a quiet read by the fire."

"Then why do you go?"

"It's part of my life."

Logue scowled.

"And you call that pleasure?"

"No, I don't." She shrugged her shoulders. "It's hard work. But it has to be done."

The artist made no further comment. At the door, he paused.

"On Thursday then? I didn't say anything more upstairs as I thought that the portrait might be a secret and you wouldn't want your father to know."

"My *father*?" She stared at him. Then she realized his mistake. "My husband, you mean." In the introduction

she had taken it for granted that Logue had known who Philip was.

She saw amazement and sudden anger pass across her visitor's face and merge into nervous panic.

"Oh, I see." He drove his hat on to his head, muttered good night, and plunged out into the darkness, forgetting to shake hands with her.

His sudden flight completed her mirth.

"My father!" She smiled again, then frowned. Did Philip look as old as that? And why should Logue have seemed angry? "He is the oddest character I've ever come across," she decided. "In some ways he's like Pat. But stronger. Anyhow, it will be a kind of holiday going to the studio. I don't wonder the Craiks like him. He reminds me of a big child."

From above an irritable voice called her.

"Sheila! We shall be late."

Horton, armed with a whistle and carrying an opera-cloak, came fluttering down the stairs, starched, inquisitorial.

"Your gloves, m'm," she said in passing, handing over the strips of *suède*, very much like a governess correcting an unruly pupil.

Sheila began to draw them on.

"I'm here, ready," she answered Philip.

Of late she had noticed a change in him. His nerves seemed to be out of order. Whereas in the olden days, his annoyance generally turned to silence—a cold man's favourite weapon—now it was manifested by a sudden loss of control that broke into trivial scolding.

He came down with a shuffling step, which she noted, his hand pressing the rail.

"What an hour for a man to call," he grumbled. "I wonder that you saw him. It's a quarter to eight."

"We've plenty of time," she answered him peacefully.

His temper suddenly flared out. He vented it upon Logue.

"Did you see how the fellow was dressed? He looked like a tramp! If that's the type of friend that the Craiks affect,

I think you'd better avoid them in future. I don't like the acquaintance. I never did—divorced people! I've told you before, you ought to be careful. You might consider my position."

Sheila looked at him curiously. Yes, he was old. The fact stood out, augmenting her growing sense of detachment. His frothy words passed over her and left no mark. They didn't matter. Nothing mattered. She slipped her arms into her opera-cloak and her thoughts ran on. Except—she smiled, for Logue's old speech returned to her—what she made of life herself. No one could control her thoughts. Philip was powerless over her soul.

"He's an artist," she said smoothly. "I'm going to sit to him for a portrait."

Philip glanced at her, furious.

"Whatever for?"

She could read the thought behind the sharp discourteous question. Extravagance! Her head went higher.

"My own pleasure." She gathered up the long train with its cobwebby lace and preceded him to the hansom.

. . . . . .

"If ever I marry," said Logue, "I shall bribe some worthy sky-pilot to read the service in a wood. I think it's indecent to parade the most intimate emotions before a crowd of curious people simply to extort presents."

Sheila had come for her third sitting straight from a fashionable wedding, upsetting the artist by her description of the social *mise en scène.*

"Oh, there wasn't much emotion about." Her voice sounded rather hard. "To begin with, the bride was twenty and Sir Richard has been married before. He has a son in the Guards."

"Disgusting," snorted Logue. "Do you call that civilized? How can he be any sort of companion to a girl of that age?"

"He probably won't." She was flippant.

Logue gave her an angry glance and dabbed his brush against his palette with unnecessary vigour.

"Without companionship," he growled, "marriage is a desecration. At any rate to the woman. She might as well belong to a harem. Now, you've moved! More to the right —no, that won't do." He abandoned his easel and came to the little raised platform on which she posed, his face impatient. For a moment he seemed to hesitate. Then, with the tips of his fingers, he inclined her head. "That's better." He stepped back. "And the eyes this way." His voice was curt and masterful.

She obeyed him, slightly resentful. For she had felt instinctively the effort it had cost the man to touch her, before his art triumphed. Did he dislike her, she asked herself, or was it only his natural shyness?

Yet at first he had shown no such scruple. She might have been a lay figure while he decided upon the pose. She remembered the cool way in which he had altered a fold of the lace draping her shoulders and even, lost in his inspiration, taken her by the latter and turned her sideways forcibly. Why should he feel this new reluctance?

Logue went back to his work. Slowly his expression changed. His eyes grew eager, his lower lip was caught between his strong white teeth. About him was a look of power, of vigorous self-confidence.

"He's in his own world," she thought. "Immersed in the joy of creation." Her own face grew wistful.

A low exclamation broke from Logue.

"Keep like that! One minute——" He changed his brush, made a curving stroke, touched it furtively with his thumb and smiled. "That's done it! Now you can rest."

"And have some tea," said a gentle voice. Mrs. Logue had drifted in noiselessly. "I'm sure you're tired. Val's a tyrant! He never thinks that his subjects are flesh and blood."

Was there intention in the words? Sheila wondered. Now and then, she mistrusted the artist's mother. Beneath her sympathetic manner there lurked a jealous hint of

possession where her sons were concerned. Openly she deplored the fact that only one of them was married. Yet she spoke of her young daughter-in-law with a covert amusement that neared disdain. She was, as Logue had declared, a "wonderful" mother in many ways; in touch with the younger generation and lenient to their shortcomings. There could not have been a greater contrast than that between herself and Mrs. Travers. For she seemed to have abdicated all maternal rights and observances, proud to be her boys' comrade, and obedient to their slightest wish.

Sheila, at first, had felt the charm of the unusual atmosphere. But, little by little, a doubt crept in. Was it love—or selfishness?

Mrs. Logue, since her husband's death, had been left with a reduced income. She was largely dependent on her sons for luxuries or outside pleasures. By her unfailing tolerance—a deliberate closing of her eyes to their faults and weaknesses—she had won not only their passionate worship but many comforts for herself. Worldly-wise and remarkably clever, pretty still in her faded way, she monopolized each son in turn and quietly warned off intruders.

Even Sheila, a married woman, had been subjected to the process. Yet at times the genuine charm of this woman, so fragile, with her well-bred voice, her dainty old age, and her wit, induced in Sheila a misgiving: the fear of judging her unjustly.

Now again, she felt uncertain.

"That's very kind of you," she replied. "I should love a cup of tea. I'm stiff!" She rose and stretched her long neck. "But isn't it far too early?"

"We've no fixed hours for meals here, have we, Val?" Mrs. Logue laughed. "It only means putting on the kettle." She came up behind her son and studied the portrait. "You're getting on."

"Yes. I'm satisfied to-day. I shall leave it at that. The light's going."

"Mayn't I look?" begged Sheila.

"No. Not until it's finished." He was adamant on this point.

Mrs. Logue smiled sweetly.

"I'm privileged," she explained to Sheila. "It doesn't matter what I think. I'm only the old mother." There was subtle triumph under the speech with its gentle self-depreciation.

"'Only'?" Sheila looked amused.

Logue's eyes came round to her face. They were mischievous.

"She doesn't mean it. She knows she has the whip-hand." He patted his mother's arm.

She slipped her fingers over his.

"*Dear* boy." Her voice caressed him. "Now, let's go in to tea. Mrs. Antrobus looks weary."

She led the way up the steps that connected the studio with the house, down the narrow shabby passage and into a front room from which, by craning one's neck out of the window, a glimpse of the river could be won.

The simple meal passed gaily and Sheila went upstairs to change. In the hall, as she came down, muffled in her long fur coat, she found Logue.

"Are you walking? If so, I'll come part way with you."

She hesitated and looked at her watch.

"I think I've time. We're dining at home. And I'm longing for some exercise."

"Then let's go by the Embankment and later on we'll pick up a hansom. It ought to be a fine sunset."

Mrs. Logue, like a wraith in her soft grey dress, slipped out of the dining-room.

"What energy!" Her dark eyes, still youthful, but set in fine wrinkles, surveyed the pair, curiously watchful.

"Can you spare him?" Sheila smiled.

"Yes. To *you*." It was gracefully said. "I know he's safe in your hands." Her silvery laugh pointed the speech.

Logue stalked out without comment, holding back the door for Sheila.

They walked in silence down the street. Sheila felt a little ruffled. No woman cares to be reminded forcibly of her married state.

"Well?" Logue turned his head and looked at her. They had reached the river, warmly grey, flowing swiftly on its long journey to the sea. He paused and leaned on the low wall. "I believe you'd sooner be alone."

"Then you're wrong."

"Sure?"

She nodded her head.

His face cleared.

"Then come along! I'm going to let you into a secret—show you a private haunt of mine."

"Here?" She looked about her, surprised; at the straight broad walk, with its worn benches, and across the road the bare boughs of the trees that formed a desolate grove for the statue of Carlyle.

"Yes." He laughed boyishly. "Only you're not to look behind you. That will break the faery spell."

They stepped out. The evening air was sharp with the promise of a frost. Away to their right lay Battersea Park like a patch of country that had slid into London by mistake. Gulls rose and dipped on the water, wailing good night with their raucous cry. Everywhere else was the hushed sense of a winter twilight fading to darkness.

"Now." Logue, with a sigh, checked her. "This way, and keep on looking to the left. I want to give you a surprise."

They had come to a little pier built out for the river steamers which had not yet resumed work. The boards felt hollow under their feet as they made their way to the farther end, skirted the low building, deserted, its ticket office closed, and found themselves in the lee of the wind, facing west, on the narrow platform.

Sheila gave an exclamation of surprise and delight. They were gazing into the heart of the sunset.

It stained the sky in floating bands of amber and rose and

glorified even the pair of modern bridges and the black chimneys rising straight from the south bank at the curve of the river. The water caught up the reflection, and the ancient peace of Cheyne Walk—where the square tower of the church stood forth, and, beyond it, huddled Lombard's Row—seemed full of bygone recollections, once more the village on the marsh where Henry VIII. had hunted snipe.

"Turner lived just down there," Logue broke the happy silence, a long arm stretched out, pointing. "Here comes one of the barges he loved." A dark mass was floating down the centre of the bright water towards them where they stood on their island. "Wonderful, isn't it?" As she agreed, he added, smiling, "I told you you didn't know your London. This is a bit of mine." He leaned forward on the rails, his arms folded, his head thrown back, drinking in the perfect scene.

Never before had she felt so closely in touch with the man. His simplicity and his rough strength appealed to her. They gave her courage. Here, with no effort, was sheer content, born of beauty, for both of them. Her voice was shy with the sense of it when she spoke.

"I'm so glad you brought me here and let me share your secret haunt. You might have kept it to yourself."

"Oh, with *you*——" He broke off, frowning.

"But I'm a Philistine," she suggested.

"You're not! You're utterly out of place in the senseless life that you live." He checked himself. "Was that rude?" His eyes were wistful. "I didn't mean it. But it hurts me. It's such a waste."

She could not answer. She stared ahead.

"Well, I've won this memory," she said, after a soft spell of silence.

"I too." He was looking at her. Her face was sad and it heightened the charm of her fresh young beauty, warmly alive against the darkness of her furs. At her breast was a drooping bunch of violets. Logue's glance lingered on them.

"You might give me those." His voice was abrupt.

She looked up, startled by the request.

"They're dead! Do you *really* want them?"

"Yes—no." He seemed confused. "That is—they would help me to visualize this—afterwards." It sounded lame. "And it's time we were going," he added brusquely.

Sheila nodded.

"I'm afraid so. But it's so deliciously peaceful here. Good-bye, old river." She moved away regretfully. "I shan't forget you."

As they walked back along the pier, she drew out the pin that secured the flowers, and held them out.

"They've no scent." She spoke lightly.

Logue took them and lifted them up to his face.

"Yes, they have." He did not thank her.

A hansom came jingling down the Embankment. He hailed the driver and turned to Sheila.

"You'd better take this one. Cabs are rare between here and the King's Road." Then he became professional. "Tuesday, at ten. It's not too early?"

"No." She felt taken aback. His face looked stern and unfriendly.

"I hope to finish the portrait," said Logue, "with two more sittings."

It was a dismissal.

"That's excellent," said Sheila coolly.

As she drove home she felt wild with herself for having given him the flowers.

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Notwithstanding Logue's announcement the sittings grew in number. The one that followed their evening walk down the Embankment saw very little work accomplished. For Sheila herself was not in the mood. Logue lost all patience with her. She posed stiffly, expressionless.

"You look the Perfect Society Lady," he told her brutally. "You'd make an excellent photograph for the front page of some Court journal. What's the matter?"

"Nothing," said Sheila.

"Then get down and run about."

She laughed into his angry face.

"I mean it. I'm not going to paint any more whilst you look like that. It's a waste of time.'" He pulled his handkerchief out of his pocket and blew his nose vigorously, unaware that with the action a withered bunch of violets had been dislodged from their hiding-place.

He saw her give a little start. A dimple stole into her cheek.

"Well?" His brown eyes questioned.

"I'll be good. I was in a bad temper. My cook gave notice this morning."

"I don't blame her," said the artist.

She accepted this with a grimace.

"Now you look more yourself!" His laugh rang out. He picked up his brushes. The sitting came, too soon, to an end.

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At last they arrived at the final one.

As a rule they were left alone, but to-day Mrs. Logue appeared, smiling and apologetic, and settled herself near the window, her knitting spread out on her knee.

"If you're sure I'm not in the way," she said, "I should enjoy a little chat. I've hardly seen Mrs. Antrobus. You must turn me out if I talk too much."

Logue nodded.

"All right."

He was absorbed in the finishing touches of the dress in the picture, which left the sitter free for sustained conversation. Mainly between the two women, it turned at length to the Craiks and their country home. It was evident that Mrs. Logue was fond of her nephew. Her own husband had been a soldier. She spoke pleasantly of Cara, aware of Sheila's relationship, but without any real affection. Sheila detected this. She was grateful when Logue broke in with a hearty word of praise.

"She's a plucky woman. I respect her."

His mother smiled, her eyes on her knitting. But she followed the speech up gracefully:

"She is pretty too, with charming manners. No wonder she had her way in the end! And Tim is a model husband."

"He ought to be." Logue looked grim.

Sheila was interested.

"You don't approve of divorce?" she suggested.

"No." He spoke indistinctly, a brush held between his teeth. "I don't concern myself with its ethics, but I hold that no man has a right to drag a woman through the mud. It's selfishness, from beginning to end."

"But he paid as well," sighed Mrs. Logue. "He hated giving up the army."

"And what could they do?" asked Sheila. "Cara was dreadfully unhappy."

"All the more so," Logue countered, "when she knew that Tim wanted her. He ought to have controlled his tongue, or gone away out of her life. He knows what I think. We've had it out."

He looked so aggressive that Sheila smiled.

"But Tim ignored your advice and now you're all the best of friends and *they're* happy! Doesn't that prove some flaw in your argument?"

"They weren't happy. They were wretched," Logue retorted. "There were times when everything hung on a thread. You see, I've been through it all with them. Mick was really their salvation. Something to live for, besides themselves. The Windmill Farm was the result. A healthy life and occupation instead of drifting about, idle, and suspicious of every one they met. Horrible"—his voice was jerky—"that restless existence in small hotels, dreading the sight of familiar faces, and the curiosity of servants. That's what Tim's love brought Cara. And a woman always suffers more—is hounded more. God knows why! *You* wouldn't like it?" His eyes narrowed.

"No." She gave a little shiver. It brought back the memory of Crombie and her wild dream of escape. She knew now that, not for a moment, had she really loved the man She had yielded to his fascination, weary of her loneliness.

She went on hastily, "But if Tim had gone away, Cara would have been broken-hearted."

"He could have stayed and remained a friend."

Mrs. Logue laughed softly.

"My dear, you don't understand. You're such a hopeless old bachelor. Tim would never have stood the strain."

"Why not?" Logue stepped back from the picture, his attention divided. Sheila could see him clearly, the obstinate set of his chin, the light of battle in his eyes. "If a man can't control himself for the sake of a woman, it's *not* love. He's a weakling—or an animal."

The rough words had no effect on Mrs. Logue. She was still smiling.

"I don't quite agree with you. You'll know some day. When you fall in love."

Logue glanced swiftly at her. She was knitting, her delicate old hands ivory-white against the wool, her face placid, the youthful eyes that resisted the telltale, fine wrinkles lowered, as she counted the stitches.

"I may." He went back to his work. "But it's not likely to change my opinion."

There came a tap at the studio door and Mrs. Bean appeared, breathless, wiping her fingers on her apron. Some one was asking for Mrs. Logue.

"Don't bring them in here," said the artist as his mother passed him. "I can't work with a lot of people hanging about."

She nodded, a twinkle in her eyes.

"I'll take the hint!"

"Thanks, old lady."

Sheila anew felt admiration. Mrs. Logue *was* "wonderful."

He read the thought in her face.

"She understands. She's used to me."

"And she's never offended?"

"No. Too sound."

His listener in her own mind changed the word to "adaptable." His next remark strengthened her verdict.

"I'm going to give her a treat to-night—take her to the opera."

Sheila smiled. Mrs. Logue lost nothing by amiability.

"You're fond of music?"

"Yes, I love it. Do you sing?"

"I used to. I've given it up." She read the question in his eyes. "My husband generally works in the evening when we're at home and wants quiet. I'm so busy that I've little time during the day, and one can't sing without practice."

Logue opened his lips to speak, then checked himself. He frowned at the portrait.

"Come and say if you like it?"

She sprang up, very excited.

"*May* I?" The long train of her dress caught in the edge of the platform. Logue disentangled it. A faint scent of violets stole up from the old lace. When he raised his head his face was pale.

"Be honest, now." He spoke harshly. "If it doesn't please you, I'd sooner know."

She nodded as she crossed the room.

"I'm generally too honest! That's why I'm not a social success."

"You're better than that, thank God."

It was the first compliment she had received from his lips. It gave her a curious thrill of pleasure.

"Thanks." She coloured like a girl.

"Stand here. Not too close."

She guessed his nervous anxiety. Then she raised her eyes to the picture.

She knew at once that the likeness was striking, yet she shrank back instinctively. The power of the work frightened her. For it was not her body alone but her soul that looked forth from the canvas. A half-smile played on the lips, tenderly curved, inexpressibly youthful; but in the eyes lay pathetic wonder, the tragedy of her loneliness.

"I look——" She paused, biting her lip.

"Well?" he prompted, watching her.

"As if I were seeking, and never finding—something—what is it?"

"You know best." His voice was low, vibrant with pity. "That's how you seem to me: a child, flung back on itself, cheated out of the fullness of life."

"It's true!" The cry broke from her. "I've never known—I never shall—what it is to be really happy."

"You *will*." His hand closed on hers. It was not a caress; the grip hurt her. He stood beside her, shoulder to shoulder. "It's your right. It's what God intended."

She looked up into his moved face, feeling his strength sweep over her like a wave of faith and resolution.

"How? I'm not like other women. I've no one"—her voice quivered—"not even a friend, whom I can trust. I'm all alone. It's so—*bitter*!"

His eyes were still fixed on the portrait.

"You needn't ever want for a friend—if I'm good enough."

The humility of the speech with its simple earnestness went to her heart. She moved sideways facing him, her hand unconsciously left in his.

"I'll remember that. I do want you. You've done me worlds of good already."

Then, for the first time that day, he looked directly into her eyes.

She caught her breath, with a little gasp. She was carried up out of herself to that borderland of happiness in which a lonely soul discovers true communion with another. A rush of words rose to her lips but she checked them, awed by his expression.

The light still shone in Logue's face. It was transformed, strangely noble. He stepped back and dropped her hand.

"I'm glad. I shall always be here when you need me. It's a compact, isn't it?"

. . . . . .

When she went up to change her dress, she found Mrs. Logue saying good-bye to a pretty girl in the hall. She waited until the guest departed.

"That's Norah Strahan, a young artist. Isn't she sweet? Like Spring blossom." Mrs. Logue was enthusiastic. "She makes me regret that I haven't a daughter. Still"—she smiled—"there are other ways." Her playful intention was obvious.

Sheila felt as if a breath of cold air had swept across her.

"Val admires her," his mother added. "By the way, I've had to take your things into his room. You don't mind? There's a tiresome man come to put some shades on my electric light. It's this way." She opened a door at the back of the dining-room. "Val likes to live on one floor—and it's *so* untidy! But what could I do? You're sure that you don't want any assistance?"

"No, thanks. It's quite simple, and it doesn't matter how I look. I shall have to change, when I get home, for Hurlingham this afternoon."

"And you like the portrait?"

"*Very* much." She was not to be drawn into any discussion. "I'm quite sorry the sittings are over. I've enjoyed coming here. You must fix a day to have lunch with me before long when you know your plans." For Mrs. Logue was again on the move, to visit another of her sons.

They talked for a few more minutes, then Sheila was left alone. She drew a sigh of thankfulness and looked around her curiously. The room was bare and very light. There were no curtains at the window and the bed was drawn up under it, covered with a striped "purdah"—a gay splash of colouring. This dislocated the usual arrangements and blocked up the fireplace, against which was the lower rail. It was evident that Logue slept in the fullest draught, even in winter.

"He would," thought Sheila. "He's half a gipsy." Her lips curved tenderly. Then she gave a little start.

Above the mantelpiece, facing the pillow, was a sketch pinned upon the wall of a hooded figure, heavily cloaked, sitting on the snowy ground, bare hands clasped round her knees. From under the quaint head covering, suggestive of a

Capuchin monk, her own face laughed forth, with blue eyes alight with mischief and a straying wisp of wind-blown hair.

Logue had "visualized" to some purpose in their breathless halt on the road to Albrey.

Now she knew why his mother had been, from the first, on the defensive.

It pleased Sheila unreasonably. Smiling, she slipped out of her dress and laid it on Logue's narrow bed. Her glance fell on a little shelf above it, holding pipes and tobacco and a worn volume. She lifted it down, curious to know what he was reading. Poems, by Alice Meynell. The book opened in her hands, as a book will in constant use, at the reader's favourite page.

Sheila read:

"I must not think of thee; and, tired yet strong,
I shun the love that lurks in all delight—
The love of thee—and in the blue Heaven's height,
And in the dearest passage of a song.
Oh, just beyond the sweetest thoughts that throng
This breast, the thought of thee waits hidden yet bright:
But it must never, never, never come in sight;
I must stop short of thee the whole day long."

She looked up, tears in her eyes. Outside in a mulberry-tree that had survived the soot of ages, in the bare little Chelsea patch half swallowed by the studio, a sparrow was hopping from branch to branch chirruping to its mate, aware of the first call of the Spring, the need for a nest and fluttering courtship.

Spring? It awoke in her own heart. How would it end? In happiness—or the old vague discontentment, the empty dragging summer and winter?

She turned back hungrily to the sonnet, and read on with parted lips:

"But when sleep comes to close each difficult day,
When night gives pause to the long watch I keep,
And all my bonds I needs must loose apart,
Must doff my will as raiment laid away,
With the first dream that comes with the first sleep
I run, I run, I am gathered to thy heart."

A little sob broke from her lips, born of pain and a sudden longing. She slipped down on to her knees, her face pressed against the purdah. It smelt faintly of tobacco, mixed with a spicy Indian scent; and, ever after, in her mind, the subtle odour of sandal-wood brought a swift vision of her lover, gazing across at her hooded image. For she felt no doubt, no further amazement. This was love—the end of her quest. Forbidden, limited to friendship, yet sweetening The Empty Road.

She covered her face with her hands and a prayer went up to the London sky, grey above the mulberry-tree; an inarticulate prayer for strength to equal that of the man she loved, who resisted temptation for her sake, keeping her true to his high ideal.

CHAPTER XIX

LOGUE came rarely to Sheila's house. But they met, even when the season had caught her up in its ruthless web of never-ending social engagements.

He instilled in her a love of books. He found she had read surprisingly little beyond the usual school routine and a poor selection of present-day novels. He opened magical worlds to her, the cult of Stevenson and Henley and the modern essayists; Cunninghame-Graham's poignant sketches and those of his namesake overflowing with fervid Russian mysticism. From thence to Maeterlinck and Bergson. Sometimes he read aloud. On an unforgettable May evening he rowed her across the Serpentine and mooring up under the trees in the still dusk, he regaled her with *The Ghost Ship* until the sky, above the shadowy Kensington Gardens, thrilled to the wail of the pirates' fiddles. He taught her the meaning of poetry and surprised her with the modern output. When she wearied of the younger crowd, resenting Masefield's realism, he led her back to Shelley and Keats.

In that nightmare garden off Oakley Street, in which they trespassed by means of a gap in the castellated wall, among the amazing collection of fragments garnered from ancient ruins and built up like a box of bricks, seated on the base of a column half-hidden by the wilderness of rank grass and straggling bushes, he read her the *Ode to a Nightingale* whilst a thrush sang in the boughs above them.

Through a broken archway that had formed a part of some old Tudor building, studded with its flattened roses, she gazed, in a dream, seeing it one of those

> "Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam
> Of perilous seas, in fairy lands forlorn."

A happy hour with a ribald ending as, wandering farther, keen to explore, they came, through a tangle of undergrowth, face to face suddenly with a gargantuan statue of stucco, crooked, as though it had dropped from the skies; in modern raiment, sceptre in hand, the broad ribbon of the garter across the vast, matronly breast, a chipped crown on the massive brow: some Jubilee statue of Queen Victoria.

They laughed till the tears stood in their eyes at the amazing anachronism in that lost Hesperides with, beyond it, the grey "fish-scaled" tiles of Henry VIII's shooting lodge.

This was one of their golden days. But there were others, when the guard each set about his locked heart raised a barrier of silence. For the sadness of parting shadowed them. Yet never, by a word or sign, did Logue betray his secret longing. They kept their compact sweet and sacred. His self-control was her glory and pride and she equalled it, her head high.

The portrait had passed to Mr. Travers. She saw it again on a June evening after a dinner with her father, one of their rare *tête-à-tête*. It was hanging opposite her mother's in the lofty room at Whitehall Court.

"You still like it?" she inquired.

"In some ways." Mr. Travers was honest. "It's fine work, but the eyes are too sad."

"I can't be always laughing," she told him.

"No—though you've never lacked courage." He thought for a moment. "How is Philip?"

His voice betrayed him. He grudged the man his selfish possession of her youth—this daughter of whom he was still so proud.

"He's not well. I'm worried about him. His doctor thinks it's suppressed gout, aggravated by overwork. He recommends a cure at Homburg, but Philip refuses to leave town. At any rate before August."

"And what are your plans for the summer? Are you going with him?"

"I don't think so. He always likes being alone. You'll

laugh when I tell you my idea. I want to go to Switzerland for a month and take Aunt Susan."

"My dear child, she'll bore you to tears." He stared at her, then smiled. "Poor Susan! What made you think of it?"

"Just playing fairy godmother." Sheila laughed, but her eyes were wistful. "She's longed for this, all her life. It's been a sort of forbidden dream. To see a 'real snow mountain'! I know I shall find no end of amusement in scenes abroad through her eyes. Refreshing too, after London. I really planned it long ago, but there hasn't been a chance so far. I've been saving up," she added gaily. "We needn't go to expensive hotels. I'm sure she'd prefer *pensions*."

"Well, we'll see about that." Mr. Travers smiled. "I might be induced to help *Susan*, if you've really set your heart on it. As you know, I'm off to Norway with Rex. I was hoping you might make a third. But we start early in July."

"I'm afraid that settles it," said Sheila. "I can't desert Philip now. These attacks of giddiness make him nervous. He had one the other day in the House and broke down during a speech. He's been haunted by the fear of its recurring ever since. But he won't rest." She stifled a sigh. "Of course it's difficult for him. He's on an important new committee and is heart and soul in the Free Trade movement. There's to be a big meeting at Bristol next week, and Philip is one of the principal speakers. Which reminds me, I must get home." She glanced nervously at the clock.

"To write his speech," Mr. Travers suggested, a merry twinkle in his eye. "I believe you could. You've plenty of brains."

"No." She smiled. "Only to hear it—a sort of full-dress rehearsal! I dread them, between ourselves, as he doesn't want my real opinion and I have to be careful what I say. He has been very jumpy lately. I suppose it's partly bad health."

"I shouldn't think he's easy to live with." Her father did not mince matters. "I wish——" He checked himself, frowning, but his parting kiss was very tender. "God bless

you! You're a good child. Your mother would have been proud of you."

It was his highest meed of praise. His eyes drifted across to the picture of the one woman who had been his inspiration and his reward.

"I wonder?" Sheila thought, as she left him.

Her mother would not have approved of Crombie. But Val? She felt no misgiving herself. Her life was filled with a secret, deep happiness, stung through with pain, yet fuller for all that she suffered. She believed, too, that she brought to him an equal measure of the former. They were both young and very strong. Depression soon gave way to hope. It was not the best that life offered, yet it neared the best at intimate moments. It fulfilled her dream of companionship. The only doubt that crossed her mind was whether it was fair to Logue. But the man was prone to solitude and keenly absorbed in his art. His avoidance of marriage and social ties was not the result of their friendship. He had earned the sobriquet of the Bear—"that dear old Bear"—before she had met him.

The nickname brought a smile to her lips as the hansom rattled up Parliament Street. Her heart was jealously thankful for it. It kept him so exquisitely hers.

Philip's voice greeted her as she made her way to the first landing. She had lost her vague fear of the house after confiding it to Logue. One comment of his had broken the spell worked in the days of loneliness.

"There *may* have been tragedies there," he agreed. "But why do you only picture these? If any influence can linger from the past—which I sincerely doubt—why shouldn't it be for good as well? It's much more powerful than evil. What about the happy ghosts? Little children, proud young mothers. Birth is a mightier factor than death. It brings beauty into the world, laughter and innocence. Death is only the sloughing off of a worn-out covering—an ugly thing, to be cast aside. The house, if your theory is correct, should hold the fragrance of lavender as well as that tarnished, mouldy

sword-knot. Dwell on this, and forget the rest. One wants to air one's imagination like everything else or it gets stuffy, and rout out any morbid fancy."

It was part of his simple philosophy. It soothed her in the hushed nights when she heard the stealthy creak of the woodwork.

"I've been waiting for you." Philip appeared, a sheaf of papers in his hand. His face looked drawn and very sallow, but his eyes were bright, lit by excitement. "Just as well, perhaps. I've altered a portion—worked it up. Are you ready? Then we'll go to the drawing-room. More space, and a looking-glass.

She felt a kindlier impulse towards him. His enthusiasm fired her own.

"Quite. I'm longing to hear your speech."

"It's the best I've written." His lips twitched. "I don't want you to interrupt," he said as he followed in her wake. "You can make remarks afterwards. Though you can prompt me"—he panted a little, tried by the stairs—"in the new part."

She took the notes from his hand and settled herself on the sofa. Philip stood at the farther end of the long room. On his right was the mirror to which he had alluded.

At times he would glance quickly sideways to note the effect of a gesture; but as he got into his full stride he forgot this. A powerful speaker, the man was transformed on the platform. His voice, so flat in daily life, became clear and resonant, his thin frame seemed to expand, he was filled with the fire of oratory.

Sheila marvelled, watching him. She had never heard him speak better. Carried away, deeply moved, a quick "bravo" broke from her lips twice during the long harangue, and after the last brilliant phrase, the climax of his impassioned plea, her moment of silence—that sweetest of praise—testified to the spell he had cast.

Then she saw him stagger slightly. His hand went up to his head.

"Philip!" She ran forward. Her arm was round him, her face anxious. "Giddy?"

"It's nothing." His eyes dulled. He sat down heavily on the chair which she pushed forward. "Well?" he asked.

"It's magnificent. It couldn't be better." She stooped quickly and kissed his cheek with an odd mixture of pride and pity, the action impulsive but sincere.

To her surprise he returned the caress. He laid his head against her shoulder and drew a deep, painful breath.

"It takes it out of me," he said. "I'm very tired. I shall go to bed."

She agreed with him.

"It's the wisest plan."

But he did not stir. He seemed to be thinking. A sudden nervousness possessed her as she gazed down at his thin hair. She wished he would move. It was so unusual for Philip to show any sign of affection.

"The worst of it is that I can't sleep," he went on wearily. "I never used to worry at all. But, now, I'm afraid of my memory. Ever since I failed that night."

A wave of compassion swept over her. She smoothed back the hair from his lined forehead.

"You shouldn't worry. There's no need. You never faltered for a second. You'll carry your audience off their feet. All that you need is rest, *now*. A few good nights. Then, a triumph at Bristol."

"You think so?" He twisted his head and looked up anxiously into her face. "I get depressed, between one and two, and then I lie awake till four. Night after night! It's become a habit. And I don't like to take drugs. I wonder——" He hesitated before baring his secret thought. "Would it inconvenience you if I came back to my old room? I would try and avoid disturbing you, but I feel—oddly nervous—to-night."

Horror and repugnance seized her. She was tense with the effort that it cost her to keep her arm round his shoulder, to bear his close proximity. That this should have happened,

this crowning amazement, now, at the end of her long struggle when her whole soul belonged to another.

She searched wildly for an excuse. Before her eyes rose the scene enacted in the little boudoir when she had pleaded the same weakness. "I get so frightened—alone—at night." She could hear herself saying it and recall his slow smile of amusement and the answer that had seared her pride.

Then she heard her husband whisper, in an odd, hushed voice:

"I'm getting very old, Sheila. Sometimes—it frightens me."

Out of the ashes of that love which his selfishness had consumed sprang a noble impulse. The battle was won.

"If you really wish it," she murmured bravely.

. . . . . .

She was not to regret it. Later on, looking back to those troubled days and the week that was the sorest penance of all her weary married life, she saw that some star had guided her and she proved to the full how small a part the body played in the life of the spirit. She was his wife, after the flesh, but her soul was her own, inviolable.

Not until he had been gone a night and a day did she allow her mind to harbour dreams of Logue. They had not met for a fortnight. Now she felt a longing to see him. She turned to the telephone. The glad thrill in his voice as he answered brought a lump to her throat.

"It's *you*?" The wire vibrated with it, betraying his love against his intention. "I was coming round some time this evening to leave a book by Chesterton that I think you'll like. How are you?"

"A little tired. I've been busy. But I mean to have a rest to-night and a good read. I'm all alone. Can't you come in for a few minutes?"

"I might." She smiled at his hesitation. "I've been away for the week-end with the Craiks. I did a sketch for you, of Mick. I caught him communing with Blobs. Such a serious conversation!"

"How lovely! Do bring it. What time can you come? Could you dine with me?"

"I'm afraid not." He had never yet taken a meal at her house. She guessed his scrupulous objection. He would not be indebted to her husband, even for a cup of tea. "But I'll be round about nine. I haven't seen you for a year!"

It was lightly said, but Sheila smiled as she hung up the receiver. She looked at the clock. It was close on three. Six weary hours to wait!

She decided to pay some duty calls. The drive would refresh her and most of the people would be out, at Sandown, or elsewhere. For it was now the height of the season. She could leave cards and clear her conscience. Then, the fretful daily round of duties over, would come the dark and Logue's face, serene and sure, his fitful speech, his soothing wisdom.

At nine o'clock she sat in the boudoir, her eyes on her favourite picture. She was thinking wistfully of Albrey when she heard his knock and the whir of the bell.

He came in, announced by Horton, her nose in the air, her eyes on his coat. Disapproving gimlets they were. Shabbiness was, to her, immoral.

"*The Flying Inn*"—he held it out—"I'm longing to read you some verses in it." He looked at her keenly, then round the room. "I've never been in here before."

"No. It's my private den. But I wanted to show you *this*"—she pointed to "The Empty Road," her face eager—"do you recognize it?"

He moved closer, curiously. After a second he laughed, surprised.

"Yes. Of course I do, now. Though I'm not particularly proud of it. It was never finished. I was rushed, but the mater had promised a sketch of mine and I didn't like to disappoint her. I did it in a few hours, from memory. That hill's all wrong. I don't believe I even signed it."

"*Yours?*" Her eyes were wide with amazement. "You painted it?"

"I plead guilty. Didn't you know? How funny! And it's the road we took to Albrey."

"It's more than that." She smiled slowly. "I'll tell you.

It's part of my daily life. Only—perhaps you'll think me foolish?" She was seized with a sudden shyness.

"I don't see why that matters." He looked at her whimsically. "Not just between ourselves. It puts us on the same level. There's a sort of divine foolishness that belongs to artists and to children. Yours would be of that description."

He settled himself in the arm-chair, a little sideways so as to face her, one broad shoulder wedged in the crack, his legs crossed, loose-limbed and at ease, though quaintly out of place in the little French boudoir.

She noticed this, with approval.

"You don't match!" She waved her hand gaily round the dainty room, so feminine and overcrowded with delicate pieces of furniture.

"No, I require a spacious setting. I feel like Queen Victoria in that labyrinth of Dr. Phéné's. But I won't move. There'll be nothing broken! Please tell me about the picture."

She obeyed him, up to a certain point, confessing her first annoyance over Cara's photograph and his intrusion on the scene that had meant stark solitude to her. But there were gaps in the story which he filled for himself. She did not allude to the loneliness of the empty road as typical of her own life. For beyond that brief and sudden outburst in the studio, months ago, she had been strictly loyal to Philip. Yet Logue guessed what she had suffered.

"So that was why you were so keen to finish the walk that snowy day?" he said when she had ceased speaking.

She nodded.

"I wanted to get to Albrey and see what lay beyond the hill."

"You would have spoilt the mystery." He was thinking it out in his own fashion. "That's one of the splendid things in life. One never knows what's coming." A dreamy look came into his eyes. "Some great adventure that turns on a trifle, a voice calling through the dark——" He stopped,

startled. The telephone bell at his elbow was ringing noisily.

"That's uncanny," laughed Sheila. "Here's your hidden oracle. I must answer it." She crossed the room and listened at the instrument. "Hullo? Yes, it's the right number." In a swift whisper to Logue she explained, "It's a Trunk call," and waited, patient.

The artist watched her with inward pleasure, the graceful lines of her body, the eager, attentive poise of her head.

"I'm Mrs. Antrobus," she said in answer to a fresh inquiry. "Yes. *What?*"

He saw her stiffen. He guessed at once she was in trouble, not only from her broken speech and her quick, anxious flood of questions but through his intuitive love for her.

"I'll come. By the next train," he heard her say finally. "You're very kind. Please do." Her voice faltered. "Good-bye." She placed back the receiver.

For a moment she stood there, her face dazed.

"What is it?" Logue had reached her side. "Bad news?"

She nodded, pale.

"My husband. A stroke. He was speaking to-night." Her hands were clenched. "Oh, I do *hope* he got through it!" The generous cry rose from her heart. Then she pulled herself together. "I must go to Bristol immediately. He's staying at an hotel in Clifton. No, don't speak!" Her gesture checked him. "Not yet—I must think. The time-table—it's in the hall. Will you fetch it?"

He was off at once, shocked, but thankful to be, for a moment, alone with his thoughts. Death? Was this the solution? He dared not even dream of it. It was shameful to wish for such a release. He felt a potential murderer. Yet in his heart sang a wild song. Free? He thrust the vision aside.

"Poor chap——" He gave it up in despair. "What a damned hypocrite I am!"

When he came back she was gone. But the door of her

bedroom was wide open. He could see her thrusting a few things into a small suit-case. She called to him.

"Will you read them out! The trains to Bristol—not Clifton Down."

"There's only one you can catch now. The eleven-thirty. It's a slow one."

"Never mind. I'd sooner get off."

He approved.

"Yes. We'll go by that."

"*We?*" He heard the catch in her voice.

"I'm coming with you." He sounded stubborn. "What did you think?"

After a moment her reply came back, indistinctly:

"I didn't think. I might have known."

. . . . . .

Through the dark they rocked on. Logue had made her lie down. They had the carriage to themselves. He had drawn the screen across the light and his coat was rolled up under her head. From his corner by the open window, for the June night was heavy with thunder, he saw at last that sleep had gained a merciful victory over sorrow.

Still as a child, her dark lashes sweeping the curve of her pale cheeks, her breath soft and regular, she lay, secure in her lover's keeping.

Then, at last, he relaxed his guard. All his passionate love for her rose up in his rugged face. He absorbed her with hungry eyes.

She stirred, restless in her sleep. Cramped by the narrow seat, she flung out a foot, seeking space. The flimsy skirt of her summer dress fell back, disclosing not only her ankle but the fine curve of the limb above in its taut silk stocking.

Logue smiled. Then tenderly, inch by inch, holding his breath, fearful of disturbing her, he pulled down the erring folds. Now, only her little feet peeped forth primly from the pleats. She was so sacred in his eyes.

Yet a sudden longing seized the man to press his lips, that were hot and dry, against the arch of her instep. His pulses

were throbbing, his head felt light. She would not know, she was soundly asleep. He stood up, his chin set, and made his way to the corridor.

Here he paced determinedly, staring out through the broad windows into the nothingness beyond. For the moon had set, the night was black.

The train swept into a long tunnel, out again, then slackened speed. Bath. Logue went back to Sheila. The station had awakened her.

"Is it Bristol?" She started up.

"No. But it won't be long now."

She sighed.

"I think I've been asleep." Then smiled at him, half ashamed. "And you?" she asked.

"Smoking," he answered. "And taking a constitutional. It's a long train. I crossed two bridges that were very unsafe, and scuttled home, frightened by the noise of the tunnel. You're looking better."

"I'm all right." Her voice was grave. "It's only the fear of getting there—too late. In case he should ask for me. But the doctor said he was quite unconscious."

Logue nodded.

"Better so." He drew up the window blind. "I believe—— Yes, it's getting light. Come and sit here and watch it. There are always wonders in the dawn."

Slowly it crept across the sky, wan at first and strangely death-like, then a delicate primrose colour, suddenly to be shot through with pink-tipped arrows until the whole heavens were flushed, birds stirred, and the earth awoke to a new day.

In Bristol the lamps looked scared beside it. Up steep, shuttered Park Street their cab groaned. Through the Triangle, past white houses with drawn blinds and a conscious air of rectitude, through the demure "selectness" of Clifton, with glimpses of trees, dew-laden grass, luxuriant creepers, iron gates, they moved like a pair in a dream.

"When we get there," Logue broke the silence, "I shall disappear. But, later on, I'd like some news, if possible. I

thought I'd have a tramp on the downs—go across to the Sea Walls—and call in on my way to the station. Do you think you could leave a message for me?"

"I will." A thought flashed across her. "But breakfast? You must breakfast somewhere. You've been so good. And I've *never* thanked you!"

He laid his hand over hers.

"I wish to God I could do more."

She shook her head. She could not speak. He went on, in a lighter tone:

"I think you can safely depend on me to minister to the inner man. I'm not unused to foraging. I have a fancy to ferret out a coffee-house I visited years ago, near the Drawbridge, and hear strange oaths and talk to men with little gold rings in their ears." He was doing his best to cover time.

The cab stopped with a jerk. He saw her draw a deep breath. Without a word he helped her out and rang the bell of the closed hotel. Its loud clang shocked the silence. Their presence there seemed suddenly an indiscretion. The whole adventure was grotesque in the early sunshine that mocked at them and at Death.

A sleepy night-porter appeared. Logue explained, his voice aggressive. For the man looked like a Peeping Tom, gazing from one to the other.

"Take Mrs. Antrobus up. *At once.* You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Sheila already had slipped past him. On the threshold she turned. Her eyes sought Logue, bare-headed, his face grey, suddenly haggard. Her lips moved, but no words came from them. Abruptly he turned away. He dared not let her see what he felt.

. . . . . .

It was two hours later when Logue came back. The hotel had awakened to life. The resplendent hall-porter looked curiously at the tall figure with dusty boots and unshaven chin who asked curtly for news of the man brought back overnight, a tragic husk, from the scene of his triumph

For Antrobus had finished his speech.

One brief moment he saw himself a god among men, his laurels sure. The next his mortal brain collapsed. Amidst the deafening applause he fell, so swiftly cut off from his kind that they clapped him as he lay on the ground, his face twisted, body inert, foiled at the height of his vast ambition.

The porter answered Logue's inquiry civilly, yet with an air of gloating over important doings.

"He's dead, sir. Passed away without recovering consciousness. At six o'clock. The lady's come——" He stopped, amazed. With an angry gesture, Logue had swung round on his heel.

He strode across the hard white road and plunged in among the trees. His face was turned from the haunts of man. He wanted space, the open heights where the wind blew, free, across the downs. There, under a hawthorn bush, he flung himself down, full length, and buried his face in the cool grass.

"Thank God! . . . Poor chap——"

He cried like a child.

CHAPTER XX

SHEILA stood on the balcony of her hotel at Pontresina, looking over the Roseg glacier.

In the room behind her, Aunt Susan was directing highly-coloured post cards. For her dream had come true, bewilderingly true, yet with one bitter disillusion.

"Of course it's very beautiful, love," she had said to Sheila, her nose flat against the window of the carriage, "but not *quite* what I expected. I'd pictured a white sugar-loaf, and it's more like a plum-cake lightly powdered on the top."

"*It*" was her first snow mountain.

But everything else delighted her. Above all, Pontresina.

"It's so cosy," she explained. "I might almost be at home."

For although she went for long drives behind the little mountain ponies, gay with bells, and gazed, breathless, down the appalling chasms that gaped "right up to the edge of the road, darling, and most *unsafe* in the dark," and peered at the heights, the pines, and the flowers, in her heart she preferred a leisurely stroll through the sun-baked village street.

The smiling venders behind their stalls, on the shady side of the road, grew to know Aunt Susan, her mushroom hat with a blue veil, one end streaming, the holland umbrella, minus its button, that had a way of opening unexpectedly when she used it as a walking-stick, and her excited "*Combien?*" as she would point to some coveted object among the trifles in shell and coral, the alpenstocks with chamois horns, the wee chalets, and carved bears.

Then would follow harassing moments whilst she turned francs into pennies and back again into shillings.

"So complicated, this foreign coinage! Yes, I *think* I can afford it. I can give the paper knife to the vicar and this will do for *Mrs.* Twist. It will go nicely in my bag. *Merci beaucoup.*" The deal was concluded.

She would leave the bag at the next stall, hidden under a bright heap of silk purses with long tassels, and return, breathless, apologetic, for a strenuous search. Then leave her umbrella!

In this way it was quite easy to pass the hours before *déjeuner*. In the afternoon she would rest, planted in the hotel garden, some hot-looking crochet on her knee, which seemed to induce a quiet nap, whilst Sheila would tramp off alone, a slim, black figure, rather aloof. She made few friends in those days, her manner chilly, repelling pity.

But she found Aunt Susan a real comfort. All through that long, stunned month when she had managed to let her house and had been overwhelmed by letters, Sheila had clung to her earlier plan. Her father had not dissuaded her. He guessed the conflict in her heart: the shock, relief, fear, and pride. She had whipped herself into a spurious grief. All she needed was some one kind, placid, and incurious, who would never divine the real source of her trouble. Aunt Susan would "do very well."

She did. Her ruling preoccupation was "to take the child's mind off her sorrow—poor darling! So young to be a widow, and Philip so brilliant." Sad to think he had "given his life for his country." For it "came to that," Aunt Susan decided. He might have been Prime Minister!

But she kept this rigidly to herself, and her artless comments on foreign ways, with the childlike joy that exuded from her, went far to achieve her hidden object.

They had been to tea this afternoon at *À ma Campagne*, a little chalet perched upon a green hill, spotlessly clean, with its scent of honey and fresh-baked cakes, flaky and light, as only Swiss cakes can be. Aunt Susan had eaten far too many. She admitted it, unashamed. She was growing more roundabout every day with the unusual good living.

She waddled home by Sheila's side, her cup of joy filled to the brim when the latter paused and made her a present of a set of those shining silver pins beloved of the Swiss peasants, who wind their hair in and out of the darts.

"They're beautiful," Aunt Susan panted, and dropped one. Sheila retrieved it. "Dear me, there goes another! My fingers are all toes and thumbs. Now, how would you say that in French?" The swarthy woman behind the stall had stooped for the treasure and was busy making a neat little parcel. "*Merci beaucoup.*"

"*A vot' service, madame.*"

They passed on. Said Aunt Susan suddenly:

"Do you notice they never say '*mademoiselle*'? I really believe they think I'm married."

"Probably." Sheila choked.

Married? Not with those childlike eyes, she thought rather bitterly, later on, as she leaned on the rail of her balcony. The rosy light on the glacier had faded, leaving in its wake a green-grey lifelessness. It looked as dead as the moon's craters.

She started, hearing a kind old voice.

"Letters, child. Three for you." Aunt Susan stood in the window. "Now, do come in. It's quite chilly. Or would you like my fleecy shawl?"

Sheila took the budget quickly.

"No, thanks." Her voice was absent. She was looking at her correspondence.

Nothing from Logue! How strange it was! Since the rather curt and conventional lines which she had received from him amongst other condolences, he had not written or made a sign. She was beginning to resent it. Yet she would not break through the silence herself. Her freedom made her sensitive.

Why couldn't he write—just as a friend? Cara knew her address, and Logue had been paying a visit to Albrey, staying with his pal, Trehearne. Cara had mentioned this.

She felt restless and overwrought. For a month after

Philip's death she had thrust Logue from her heart, through a desperate sense of loyalty. But now they were in mid-September, the vines tinged with a deepening red, the peaches, golden as apricots, falling, rotten, to the ground. Autumn was coming, mature and saddened.

Sheila went back into the room.

"I'm getting rather tired of this place. What do you say to moving on?"

Aunt Susan looked up, placid.

"Just as you like, dear." She added gently, "I'm perfectly happy anywhere."

It was so true. Sheila frowned.

"I think we'll go farther south. Down to the Italian Lakes."

"Oh!" Aunt Susan's buttonhole mouth made a perfect circle. "*Italy?*"

"Yes—you dear, old, fat thing!" Sheila relaxed. "You say it as if it lay at the other end of the world. We can get there by *diligence* over the Maloja Pass. It's a beautiful drive—you'll enjoy it. We'll leave here on Saturday."

They started, on a perfect morning, Aunt Susan anxiously counting the luggage, and woeful because there was something missing.

"I'm sure of it! I made a list, but, somehow, I've mislaid it. Nine articles in all." She began again. Then her face cleared. "My umbrella! Dear me, how stupid! I was holding it all the time." Chuckling, she clambered up the steps.

The box-seat was very high, and the driver seemed a speck above his team of horses. She felt nervous. And how they whizzed round the corners! She watched for these, and closed her eyes. Supposing the reins got entangled, or they plunged against the narrow rail dividing them from a precipice? She prayed, clutching her umbrella. But after lunch her spirits revived. Sheila had made her drink some wine. Roseate dreams rose in her brain. *Wouldn't* she have "things to tell them," once safely back in England!

They reached Lugano late in the evening. It was hot. They had caught the summer up. She was kept awake half the night by a chorus of frogs in the hotel gardens. She woke to the sound of slammed-back shutters, and stole into Sheila's room.

"It's beautiful here." Her face was beaming. "I've peeped out, and oh, the *water*!"

A voice outside shrilled "Giovanni!" and wound up with a sonorous scolding.

"Aren't they noisy?" said Aunt Susan. "I've noticed that. Everything is so much *louder* than in England. Even the animals. Something was barking very late under my window last night. Yet it didn't sound quite like a dog."

Sheila smiled.

"A party of frogs. I heard them. I knew I was in the South."

"Only *frogs*?" Aunt Susan stared. "I'm thankful they don't do that in England." She said it with an air of pride. Like most of her countrywomen, she required the contrast of foreign life to rouse her slumbering patriotism.

From Lugano they went to the sister lake, and settled down at Tremezzo. Here they seemed to take root, a part of the narrow arcaded streets and irregular houses bending down to the mirror of the shining water. Aunt Susan revelled in the steamers, and even overcame her fear of the smaller craft with their gay striped awnings, "just like a baby's pram," and the swarthy boatmen who called her "*Signora*" with a flash of white teeth that won her heart.

She was pleased, too, with the change in Sheila, who was less moody and absorbed. But she did not witness the reaction that set in with the sleepless nights when, wide-eyed, she would think of Logue and wonder if she were forgotten. Why, oh, why did he not write?

In November the weather changed. Storms bore down the parched gullies, stirring the lake into white-capped waves. Snow gathered on the mountains. Tremezzo grew damp and cold.

"Pack up," said Sheila one morning. "We're off to Rome. I can't stand this."

Aunt Susan gasped.

"My love! Is it *wise*? Fever—the expense—smells!" She became wildly incoherent.

"We'll risk the lot," said Sheila, laughing. "I shan't be happy until I've seen you picnicking in the Colosseum."

Aunt Susan looked slightly shocked. Then she remembered. *Not* a church, though it sounded in some way sacred. Of course! The lions and Christian martyrs.

Once started, she thrilled with excitement.

"'See Rome,'" she said to herself, "'and——' But I'm not going to 'die'! I shall take a quinine pill each morning, and spit when I'm doubtful of the drains. Dear me, it's like a dream! To think that I'm travelling—First class—to Rome."

Alas for poor Aunt Susan! Disillusion awaited her. She had pictured a pillared, ancient town, slightly in disrepair, but set apart and discreetly labelled, like an Earl's Court Exhibition. But that vast city on its hills, where you went down a bustling street, with modern shops, cabs, and trams, and were shot headlong, without warning, into something B.C. with broken columns and towering heaps of marble and stone, in roofless confusion, were set upon by guides and beggars, were blinded by dust, bitten by flies, and lost your way, both mentally and physically, was a nightmare of tangled centuries.

She stood it bravely for a week. Sheila, soothed in her restlessness by movement, pleased to be cicerone and to revisit favourite haunts, noticed nothing until the day when Aunt Susan developed a cold.

"I think, my dear, that I'll keep my room." She was conscious of malingering, but worn out with the struggle. "It's restful to stay indoors." She looked lovingly round her retreat, a bare place with a painted ceiling, and a stone floor that was always clammy. She dared not say any more.

But a glass of hot lemonade, that night, with a dash of old Marsala in it, prescribed by the chambermaid, loosened her tongue, and she confessed. Rome was too much for her.

"I'm afraid I'm an ignorant old woman." She patted the hand that she held, for Sheila was sitting by her bed. "But I get so mixed, my head spins. The Catacombs and that dreadful Nero, and then the Pope—of course quite modern—and back again to Romulus. I never know where I am!"

Sheila, watching her, felt remorseful. She had forgotten her aunt's age.

"You *poor* old dear! Why didn't you tell me?"

"How could I?" Aunt Susan's lips trembled. "After all your kindness to me. When I think that among all your friends you chose *me*, a stupid old woman"—she wiped her eyes, tearful but happy—"and that John is paying—such an *expense*! I could go on until I dropped. You mustn't think anything more about it. I shall be quite well to-morrow. It's just this cold, and a blister I've managed to get on my left heel."

Sheila hugged her.

"You're a darling! You don't know what a comfort you've been. I couldn't have got along without you."

She was rarely demonstrative nowadays, and the old lady quivered with pleasure.

"Poor child! I understand. Only, we mustn't talk about it." This was part of her simple cure.

"No. But we'll go away from here—I'm tired of Rome myself—to some quiet place by the sea. You'd like that?"

"*Very* much." Her eyes grew vague. "What sea?"

Sheila smiled.

"The Mediterranean."

"Well, I never!" Aunt Susan chuckled. "I remember I couldn't spell it at school."

. . . . . .

They stopped for one night at Naples, then found a quiet *pension* at Posilippo, with a garden that slipped in terraces down to the sea, so blue that the brilliant heaven above strove in vain for the mastery. It had its revenge in the sunsets.

It was almost too beautiful for Sheila. She longed for grey skies and Logue. Never a word! Yet he must not guess that she missed him. For with the ache in her heart, pride

strove restlessly. She had no home now in London, and she would not go back, without excuse, to wait for her lover to make a sign.

So the sunny weeks passed on, full of content for the older woman. Such warmth—*such* post cards! The day that they went to the Solfatara, that sister of Vesuvius, daintier yet full of menace, and walked across hot ground with cracks through which the smoke filtered, Aunt Susan, nervous but thrilled to the core, ruined herself in postage stamps.

At the back of the view that centres round "Virgil's Tree"—a phenomenon that no tourist can discover, but sacred to picture post-card artists—she wrote, in her sloping hand:

"I've been all over a volcano. You can poach eggs on the rocks. Most unsafe, but a wonderful sight."

Sheila rejoiced in her simple pleasure.

They spent a week-end at Capri, visited the remains of castles where the names of Tiberius and Barbarossa linger among the fragrance of flowers, and watched the bare-footed peasants dance the famous *Tarantella*.

"Rather *fast*," Aunt Susan decided.

But the Blue Grotto rejoiced her soul. It was even bluer than the post cards! They avoided the crowded tourist hour and took a boat, one afternoon, from the Piccola Marina, making a tour of the island. Arrived at the narrow entrance, they swept in on a kindly wave, which omitted a mischievous baptism, and found themselves in the wide, cool cavern, cerulean from roof to water.

They possessed it in its perfect peace. No vociferous boys, stripped for diving, greeted them from the spit of sand. The boatman alone regretted this.

It was wonderful, he explained to Sheila, to see their bodies in the water, blue as the passionate sky outside.

"If the *Signora* permits," he said, "I, myself, will give an example. It is nothing! It would be a pleasure."

Standing up in the narrow boat, he proceeded to unbutton his shirt.

"What is he *doing*?" shrilled Aunt Susan.

Sheila, speechless with laughter, checked him.

The elderly lady was rather nervous, she remarked tactfully. She would not like to be left alone in the boat without their stalwart oarsman.

Giuseppe smiled. Reluctantly he resumed his seat. Peace reigned.

When they got back to Posilippo, Sheila's first thought was for letters. She gathered up the slender pile and vanished swiftly to her room, to be met by fresh disappointment.

It seemed to her that Philip's death had severed the link between her and Logue. Was he incurably celibate? Or his love a myth, bred of fancy? He had never breathed it. Had she made an amazing mistake, distorting friendship into depths unglimpsed by him? But even, if so, why did he not write? Was he—she shrank from the thought—afraid? Had he divined her hidden passion.

Horrible! She returned once more to the vision of "The Empty Road."

There was a hurried line from Tim, announcing the advent of a daughter. It bubbled over with happiness, relief, and a naïve pride. Mick's "nose was out of joint." A postscript was added. Cara hoped that Sheila would stand godmother. Cara had set her heart upon it.

"Don't disappoint her," wrote Tim. "She's had a pretty bad time, but, thank God, she's all right now."

Death and birth. Sheila remembered Logue's simple summing-up of the twin mysteries.

A fresh longing swept over her. To be back at the Windmill Farm again and to hear his name in daily talk, glean the latest news of him. But she overcame it. Her pride was at stake. She would show him that she didn't care.

She wrote to Cara, a tender letter, promising to do as she asked if a proxy could be found. She was not returning to England yet. She was "in love with the sunshine."

But slowly, as Christmas drew near, she noticed a change in Aunt Susan. At times her old face was wistful, and doubts assailed her. It didn't "seem right" to be sitting there, with-

out a coat, in the midday heat whilst Hannah wrote of snow and chilblains, and inquired rather pointedly after her plans. Hannah also referred to Tam.

"It's not that I don't want her to marry, when the time comes," said her anxious mistress, "though I've never thought Tam M^cGregor was a good enough match for her. But it won't hurt them to wait a little. I'm getting on, and they're both young." Hannah would never see forty again. "I wonder how the Blanket Club is doing without me." She was homesick.

Sheila deliberately steeled her heart. She began to talk of Sicily. Aunt Susan murmured "Brigands!" They remained at Posilippo.

The climax came suddenly.

Sheila was sitting in the veranda, writing a letter to her father, glancing up from time to time to watch the great red ball of the sun sink over the purple fort that juts out from the crescent of Naples, the sea on fire with its reflection, when Aunt Susan appeared, panting, her mushroom hat on the back of her head, a trembling hand pressed to her side.

"Oh, my love, such a fright!" she gasped, crimson, incoherent. "I shouldn't have gone there—my own fault! A lunatic—I'm sure he was!" She collapsed on the nearest chair. "Indecent—his legs bare—my heart's still beating. I didn't think"—a choke—"that I *could* run so fast!"

Sheila soothed her, inwardly anxious. What had happened to Aunt Susan? She had set forth half an hour ago to post a letter on the hill, very happy and serene, refusing Sheila's company.

"Exercise will do me good," she had explained with a little chuckle, "I've had to let out *another* skirt-band!"

So what could have caused this panic?

"Thanks, my darling—better soon." Sheila was fanning her quietly. "So foolish of me." She wiped her face. "But I *am* glad to be safe home.

"Where did you go?" asked Sheila, at last.

"I'll tell you. *There*—I've got my breath! You mustn't

worry, dear child. It's only asthma—the doctor said so. I've always wanted to see that tomb—perhaps if I undid my collar? Yes, that's far easier—the one on the hill, like a little temple, where that poor man wanted to bury his wife and they wouldn't allow it. Not by law. Or was it, perhaps, sanitation?" She paused.

"I remember," said Sheila gently.

"A sad story. All that *expense*!" Aunt Susan was recovering fast. "It was so peaceful in the sunset and I was thinking about home, when suddenly there appeared a creature"—she shuddered—"with hair right down to his shoulders and a dirty old ribbon round his head, in a sort of tattered, brown night-gown. Nothing on his arms or legs, and a long stick in his hand, and he shouted at me and leaped in the air—just like those people in the Bible possessed by an evil spirit! I ran. I never looked behind me, so I don't know what became of him. But it gave me such a dreadful turn." A pause. "It couldn't have happened in England."

A world of longing was in the conclusion. Sheila made up her mind.

"No. What a nasty fright. I don't wonder you were scared. But the man's harmless. I've heard of him. A German artist who belongs to some cult of the Simple Life. He lives in a cottage behind the tomb and paints. He did the curious fresco we saw on that long wall at Capri. You remember? A procession of children, in silhouette, dancing, with goats and fauns, to greet the sun. I think I told you that when he got to the end of the wall he came to the little English Church, and he carried on the fresco, right across the front, one evening. The next day was Sunday, and the congregation was stupefied. There was a great fuss about it. So the artist moved to the mainland."

"Oh? An *artist*," said Aunt Susan. She sniffed on the word. "But he can't believe that it's right to go about like that. His chest all bare—it was shocking!" She lowered her voice. "I could see his *knees*." A sigh. "But artists are peculiar."

Sheila flinched. It seemed true.

"Well, I think this must be your last adventure. If we mean to get home for Christmas."

It cost her a supreme effort, but she felt convicted of selfishness. She had her reward.

"*Home?*" Aunt Susan's old eyes filled with happy tears. "Oh, my love!" She hugged her niece. "You really feel like going back?"

Sheila nodded.

"I think it's time. We'll see about our tickets to-morrow. Our week here is up on Wednesday."

Aunt Susan thought for a moment.

"Tissue-paper," she said abruptly. "I meant to tell you—I'm so ashamed! I rolled it all up in a neat bundle and put it on the top of the wardrobe. In Rome. It seemed such a safe place."

"And it's there now," suggested Sheila, a twinkle in her blue eyes.

"No. I looked for it, *everywhere*. But I managed at last to get a little from the chambermaid—a kind girl. It's not enough for a second packing. Of course I gave her an extra tip." A pause. "Wasn't it funny, Sheila? I found amongst it a skein of wool that I'd lost for months. Most providential!"

. . . . . .

London, damp with greasy pavements and dirty heaps of thawing snow, and Aunt Susan recovering fast from a bad crossing, still sallow but eager-eyed, immensely pleased with the private hotel in a quiet street to which her dear niece had brought her; the sort of place that "county people" patronize as a part of tradition, overlooking poor cooking for the pregnant fact that, years ago, "Mamma stayed here for her trousseau."

Aunt Susan studied the menu with joy.

"Listen, Sheila." Her appetite was reviving fast, with a sense of immense hollowness. "'Clear soup,' 'Cod and egg sauce'—*doesn't* that sound nice? Then a roast leg of mutton. Fancy a real joint again! After all, there's nothing like our

own good English food. I enjoyed some of those foreign dishes, but they aren't really *nourishing*."

She ate her way through five courses and wound up with gritty coffee and some tough and withered French prunes. They had a private sitting-room, for Sheila meant her aunt to enjoy the two last days of her holiday. She settled her in a deep arm-chair. The old lady patted her cheek.

"I'm *so* happy." She beamed at the fire. "Real coal, and a carpet! I don't think I'll do any crochet to-night. I just want to sit and enjoy it."

She meditated.

"We haven't the sunshine but we *do* understand comfort. Don't you think that's really better?" She stroked the dusty "saddle-bag" on the worn arm of her chair. "Of course it was very lovely there, but I'm not sure that it's right to mix up the seasons that God intended. England is the healthiest place." Her head nodded. With a start, she looked up. "No, I wasn't asleep. I was thinking. Shall we have bacon for breakfast?"

"I shouldn't wonder." Sheila smiled. "Bacon and eggs —assisted by porridge."

"Those *œufs à la coque*," mused Aunt Susan. "They rather startled me at first. But, of course, it must have been *hens* that laid them." She closed her eyes and fell asleep.

Sheila tiptoed to the window. There, beyond the lighted lamps, across the never-ending traffic, in the quiet by the river, Logue moved, wrapped in silence.

If only she could peep at him, herself unseen, hear his voice, or stretch out an eager hand and touch, unfelt, his thick, rough hair.

Her restlessness had reached its climax. To be here, in London, so near to him, yet with this barrier between them. Why had she ever left the South?

Her eyes fell on the telephone. Recklessly, aware that her pride would rise in arms if she paused to think, she rang up the office below and gave the old familiar number. Then

the reaction set in. Terror seized her. What could she say? She sought in vain for an excuse.

By the fire, Aunt Susan slumbered, her buttonhole mouth wide open, her face passionless as a child's. Sheila felt a throb of envy, as she stood, waiting for Logue's voice.

She heard a click at the other end of the wire, then an unknown clear "Hullo!"

Disappointment flooded her. For a moment she could not answer.

"Hullo! Are you there?" The youthful speaker sounded impatient. "Is it Mrs. Logue you want? If so, she's out. Can I take a message? I'm Miss Strahan—Norah Strahan."

Sheila recovered her presence of mind.

"No, thank you. I'll write—later."

Mrs. Logue was the last person with whom she wished to be in touch. She rang off with a sense of escaping a further peril that emphasized the folly of her impulsive conduct.

"Norah Strahan." She repeated the name with inward mistrust, seeing again the girl lingering on the doorstep; the pretty face with its corn-coloured hair bunched on the nape of the slender neck above the square-cut velveteen dress, copied from some Renaissance picture.

How young she was, and virginal! "Like spring blossom"—the phrase recurred.

Sheila's glance fell upon her widow's weeds as she crossed the room to her old place by the fire. The contrast between them brought bitter thoughts.

Was this the reason for Logue's silence? He admired the girl. His mother had said so, had hinted at further developments. And here she was at his studio.

Alone?

A picture flashed up before her of Val, cross-legged on the low divan, his chin propped upon his hand, rambling on disconnectedly, and the fair-haired girl listening, giving him the cues he needed, forming a vision of radiant youth to satisfy his love of beauty.

She walked across to the looking-glass that was reared

between the high windows and studied her sombre figure, relieved at the neck and wrists by the narrow bands of lawn. She hated herself in her mourning. This was what life had brought her: the negation of desire. A void in which love held no part, only logic, the bitter knowledge that she owed her failure to herself. And suddenly she thought of Lance, offering her his clean boy's heart.

If Youth but knew! She turned away. A voice came from the deep arm-chair.

"I think I've had a little nap. Dear me, it's ten o'clock. And I wanted so much to talk to you about your plans." Aunt Susan's head reared itself up sleepily, with a ripple of her double chin.

"Plans?" Sheila shrugged her shoulders. "I've no plans. I shall go to Cara when I've seen you off for the North. They've asked me down there for Christmas, and, since Father's away in Scotland with Rex, I think it's the best thing to do. He didn't know I was coming home, and I won't upset all his arrangements."

She spoke coldly and evenly. Aunt Susan's eyes filled.

"Poor child," she thought. "She's missing Philip. How hard it is! Christmas too. I must try and take her mind off it." With an effort she kept up the conversation. "You'll like being at the Windmill Farm?"

"Perhaps."

There came a choked sound from the depths of the rusty arm-chair. A pair of plump, tremulous arms were held out invitingly.

As once in the early days of childhood, Sheila surrendered to their comfort.

"I shall miss you," sobbed Aunt Susan.

Yes, her cheeks were *very* soft.

CHAPTER XXI

SNOW on the sails of the windmill and a crescent moon peering down above the pointed tips of the firs. It seemed to Sheila, gazing across to the veiled heights, that in the air was a note of suspense as though the earth held her breath, watching the clouds, piled against the deep blue heavens, like down off the angels' wings.

The familiar scene recalled to her thoughts of another wintry night when she had stood at the open window and accused herself of injustice to Magda. How far away those days seemed. The days when Crombie had stirred her passion; that era of false gods. And her love for Sandy—a child's affection, with the dawning of her womanhood. Shallow emotions! She knew now. The knowledge was not without bitterness.

Since her return from the South she had seen Magda and had attempted to bridge the gulf dividing them. But with little success. In her old friend's eyes she had read reproach and a sense of loss in regard to the dead man that far outweighed her own feelings. Magda was the true widow.

Sheila had suffered from the strain of the paradoxical position. She could no longer pretend to herself that she grieved for Philip. He was gone, with that utter finality which marks the death of the self-sufficient; the earthly award of egotism. For the only measure of success that proclaims a man's humanity lies in the strength of the memories surviving him in the hearts of friends. Antrobus was already forgotten, save by one emotional woman who had never fathomed his character.

Sheila shivered at the thought. Before her, too, lay loneliness, a life that seemed to hold no object, all the old links shattered. Even in the Windmill Farm she stood apart, a mere spectator of the happiness of others, and the love that still evaded her.

There was something death-like in the silence of the frozen world beneath her window, waiting for its mantle of snow. Then, breaking the tense stillness, came the shrill cry of a child; a patter of feet and small hands beating against the locked door.

"Let me in! *Please, quick!*" The urgent summons was cut by a sob.

Sheila flew to obey the request, and into her arms sprang a little figure with tangled curls; a wet cheek was pressed to hers, a cold bare foot grazed her wrist as she raised him up.

"Why, Mick—you *poor* mite! What is the matter?" She hugged him, anxious.

"He's been a naughty boy, m'm." The nurse appeared, flushed, indignant, closely in the truant's wake. "He doesn't deserve any kindness!"

Mick clung to his protector. Sorrow was giving place to triumph.

"Said I'd tum," he announced. "Done it!"

Here was rank rebellion.

Sheila choked back a laugh. She kissed Mick and put him down, mindful of authority in the shape of the buxom woman, unsmiling, in the doorway. He was clad in elegant blue pyjamas, with barrels and cords of white braid, and from the pocket there protruded a coral rattle with silver bells.

"That too," said the nurse grimly. She laid a purloining hand on the trophy, but Mick squirmed away from her. "I don't know what's to be done with him, m'm. Jealous isn't the word for it! There's nothing of Baby's he won't take. He's been sent to bed as a punishment before his time, and yesterday, when I wasn't looking, he pinched poor Baby. He's a very, *very* naughty boy."

"Not!" said the culprit defiantly.

"Oh, *Mick*!" Sheila knelt down beside the sturdy little fellow, so handsome in his mutiny against the rule of womankind. "Aren't you fond of your little sister?"

Mick coolly shook his head.

Sheila thought for a moment. It was no good explaining to him the tyranny of relationship. Mick sidled nearer, smiling.

"I love *you*," he suggested, with an unabashed desire to flatter.

Sheila had an inspiration.

"Well, supposing, in return, I pinched you? Hard—to *hurt*—what would you say?"

"You wouldn't!" Mick beamed at her.

"No, you're right. Shall I tell you why?"

He nodded, leaning up against her, stroking the soft velvet tea-gown.

"Because I should hate to be a coward."

Mick frowned, considering this.

"You see," Sheila continued gravely, "I'm ever so much bigger than you. You couldn't really hit back, so it wouldn't be fair play. Not sporting—you know what that means?"

The child nodded, his flower-like eyes fixed on hers. He was trying to use his small wits.

"So when you're cruel to Baby," said Sheila, "though you mayn't know it, you're cowardly."

"Not—I'm *not*!" His voice rose. "Daddy said I was ever so bwave, when he pulled out dis one——" With parted lips he pointed to a gap in the row of tiny, uneven teeth. "And I bled—all down my fwont." His face was resentful yet pleading.

"But a brave man never hurts a woman. Not purposely." She smiled at him. "If he should do so, by accident, he tries to make it up to her by being extra kind after. So we shall see which you are by the way you treat poor Baby; who's so *very* little, remember that. Shan't we, nurse?" She glanced up, covert amusement in her eyes.

"Yes, m'm," said that worthy, with a non-committal air. "Now, Master Mick, you'll be catching cold." She swooped down on her victim.

Mick, artful, clung to Sheila. She gathered him up in her arms and rose to her feet.

"I'll take him."

A voice outside answered her:

"Give him to me—the young rascal!" Tim had crossed from his dressing-room. "Up to some mischief again, I suppose?"

"No," said Sheila loyally. "We've just been discussing a question of sport. One of the rules, haven't we, Mick? And now we're going back to bed." She suited the action to the words. "Tiptoe—we mustn't wake Baby."

The nurse began to explain to her master. Sheila could hear them whispering as she went down the long passage. Outside the nursery door she paused, conscious of Mick's silence. What was he contemplating?

"Well?" She smiled down into his eyes.

"I'm finking," said Mick solemnly. "She'll gwow, won't she?"

"Baby? Of course."

"Get as big as me?"

"Some day." Sheila, watching the serious face, saw a dimple steal out in his cheek.

"And stwong enough to hit back," Mick concluded. "All wight. I'll *wait*."

. . . . . .

"I had to hug him," Sheila confessed, over dinner, to his parents.

"Still, it's something gained," said Cara, laughing. "I'm glad you upheld your godchild's rights to chivalry—though it's rather surprising. I thought Suffragettes renounced all that? Mick has been a handful lately."

But she said it with a touch of pride. Although she adored her little daughter, Mick still held his place in her heart. He was the first-born. She could not forget she had brought a

man-child into the world. What was a girl compared to this?

She was looking very pretty to-night in the soft glow of the candles. About her was that second blooming of youth which comes to many women as the aftermath of maternity. It struck Sheila forcibly as she saw Tim's eyes fixed on his wife, full of pride and tenderness.

"Who are the other sponsors?" she asked. "I'm hoping you have an old-fashioned bishop to protest against my extreme ideas."

"Some old woman, to balance the sexes?" Tim put in with his merry laugh. "We wanted Val to be godfather, but he flatly refused—the old bear!"

A pause succeeded the remark. With all her heart Sheila longed to follow up the opening, but her courage failed her. The sound of his name had brought with it a wave of shyness. She felt spellbound, ridiculous.

Was it a bare ten months since she had sat in the same chair facing Logue, across the table, with a secret amusement that bordered disdain? Hardly a year; yet it seemed a lifetime.

She began to talk volubly about her travels and Aunt Susan's chronic lapses of memory and perpetual amazement at foreign ways.

"The poor old darling had a fit when she woke one morning to see the postman standing by her bedside with a registered letter for her to sign. She managed it, underneath the bedclothes, in a sort of tent. Can't you see her? What seemed to worry her worst of all was that her fringe was in curling-pins! So I bought her a boudoir cap in Rome. Then she was seized with a fresh qualm. Guess what it was?" She smiled at Cara.

"Not suitable to her age?"

"No. She said seriously, 'It's quite beautiful, my love, and I'm grateful for the kind thought, but do you think that *nice* people really wear these things in bed? I shouldn't like to be mistaken.'"

Tim roared.

"I must say you chose an excellent chaperon! I want to know Aunt Susan."

But Cara was studying Sheila's face.

"She's too bright," was her opinion as she noticed the nervous gestures of the hands, thinner than of yore, and the quick colour that ebbed and flowed in the cheeks, beneath the shadowy eyes. Here was a woman wearing a mask and fighting against secret trouble.

"You don't find this room too warm?" Cara suggested in the pause that followed the little story.

"No, I love it. England's cold after the South. Though I felt it far more in London. The air's so deliciously dry here. I'm longing for a good tramp." Sheila paused, glancing at Tim.

Would he remind her of the walk to Albrey, ending with the snowstorm, and bring up the subject supreme in her thoughts? She waited in a tremor of hope and fear combined; but her host failed her.

"I wonder if you can stand the car? With plenty of wraps. She's going fine—good old Scuttering Jane! To-morrow I want to visit a farmer who lives up on the downs. *That* young woman"—he smiled at his wife—"has to lie down after lunch, and I know if I leave you here together she'll make an excuse to get out of her sleep. So I thought I'd steal you, if you're agreeable?"

"I am." Sheila forced a smile, hiding her disappointment. Why didn't they talk of Val?

"And you'll see Albrey," put in Cara.

"Yes, it's on our way," said Tim. "I might drop you there for an hour, do my business and return, and we'd have a cup of tea at the inn. That is, if the weather holds."

Sheila had been occupied in peeling a pear on her plate. Looking up quickly, she was surprised to catch a wink aimed at Cara. The next moment his face was a blank.

"What is the joke?" she inquired.

Cara answered for her husband:

"It's only Tim's foolishness. He thinks he's done me out of a gossip over the fire with you to-morrow. He's becoming a frightful tyrant."

"Well, she won't rest," Tim grumbled. "She's not really strong yet, but she likes to kick over the traces. You can quite see where Mick gets it."

Cara made a grimace at him.

"Who flirted with my nurse?"

Tim threw back his head and roared. Sheila, amused, watched the pair.

"Well?" she prompted.

"Such a woman!" Tim choked. "Like a giraffe. A giraffe that had taken dancing-lessons. She used to dine, midday, with me, and to watch her curl her little finger when she raised her coffee-cup was a never-ending joy. Coquettish wasn't the word for her. I don't think I'm a vain man, but I must confess that I was frightened. She used to prowl after me in the dark when I went to shut up the chickens. Worst of all, she loved to tell gruesome stories of operations, which quite spoilt my appetite. She generally started with the soup. Thank heaven she's departed!"

"Oh, it's all very well," said his wife. "Who gave her my Christmas roses?"

"Had to. She asked for them."

"And what did she give you, in return?"

"I'll swear she didn't," said Tim hotly.

Cara, laughing, rose from the table and slipped a hand through Sheila's arm.

"Let's leave him—to his remorse. You can never trust a married man."

They went across to the "den," where bright logs crackled in the grate. Tim's big arm-chair had been ousted, and in its place was a shabby sofa with soft cushions piled snugly and carefully screened from the draught. Everywhere, about the house, Sheila's quick eyes took in touches of the loving care with which the man surrounded his wife.

"He didn't really flirt, you know," said Cara abruptly. Sheila

smiled. "I must show you the lovely present he gave me." She held out her hand for inspection. A new ring shone upon it above the narrow wedding band. "It was very naughty—he can't afford it—but still——" She left the sentence unfinished, a tender light in her dark eyes. "This one"—she pointed to its companion—"was after Master Mick's appearance. They're the only rings I care to wear."

A little silence fell between them. Sheila's face was very still. Cara glanced sideways at her as they sat facing the cheerful glow.

"There's only one thing in life worth capturing—and that's love." The thrill in her voice startled her cousin. "You'll know I'm right—one day."

It seemed a very thoughtless speech to the woman beside her in sombre black. Although she could not mourn for Philip, her state called for sympathy. Sheila felt ruffled. Her speech showed it.

"You're one of the lucky people, Cara. Some of us have no chance."

An arm came swiftly round her waist.

"You *will* have. There's joy coming." Cara kissed her averted cheek. "I'm not going to pretend, darling, that I'm sorry. I'm not. It's all for the best. He wasn't good enough for you. And I *do* want to see you happy." She broke off. The door had opened to admit Tim. She beckoned to him. "Come and tell Sheila about your fight with the vicar. We're dull! We want amusing. You can sit here." She threw down a cushion at her feet.

Tim, sprawling on the rug, his shoulders propped against her knee, obeyed. In his pleasant voice he embarked on a long account of a boys' club that had dwindled down to two members of the choir, and had then revived through the impetus of some pairs of boxing-gloves. In the end the vicar had fallen a victim to the sporting instincts of his youth, and Tim had had the chance of his life for paying back an old score; and had, incidentally, won a friend in historic British fashion.

Sheila's thoughts, at times, wandered. Why had Val refused to stand godparent to Cara's child? Had he known her own acceptance of a similar proposition and feared that this might bring them together? Why did the Craiks avoid his name? Was it merely coincidence?

Her eyes wandered round the room and discovered, at length, Logue's photograph, in a shabby frame on the piano. All through the quiet evening she was haunted by his presence.

. . . . . .

The day broke, grey and cold, the downs blotted out by mist, a presage of snow in the air, waiting to join the thin film that had lain for two days on the ground. But at twelve o'clock the sun stole out and the lowering clouds rolled back, disclosing skies of pale blue, serenely high, never-ending.

Tim welcomed it joyously. Twice during the long morning Sheila had caught him anxiously tapping the barometer. He seemed to have set his heart on the drive.

She tried to renew her old mood of interest concerning Albrey, and to stir herself into a faint excitement. But the glamour had fled. It belonged to Youth, that straining beyond The Empty Road.

As she stood in the porch, fastening her heavy coat, Cara appeared with a flower gathered from her greenhouse, a delicate pink chrysanthemum.

"The finishing touch," she said gaily. "It will look lovely against the fur. Just here——" She began to pin it in, but Sheila recoiled.

"My dear, I can't. You forget. I'm still in mourning."

"But you're outside the pale of convention in *this* house," laughed Cara. "Yes, I insist. Just to please me! Who's to see you on the downs?" She completed her task and rearranged the folds of the sombre veil shrouding the pretty face, and pulled out a curl on either side. "*There!* You look a perfect pet. Don't flirt with Tim!" Her eyes were bright. About her was an air of mischief. "Have a good drive—enjoy yourself!" She watched them start, kissing her hand and waving whilst the car was in sight.

Up the long white hill Scuttering Jane showed her mettle, then settled down to the wind-swept road gallantly. The rush of the air in their faces made conversation too much of an effort, and, mutually, they abandoned it.

Sheila leaned back in her corner and let her eyes roam at will over the vast open space, dappled with shadows from the clouds, across the swelling curves of the downs, where here and there a long rise was capped by a clump of dark trees that formed a landmark, or a copse suggested a sheltered cover for game.

The silence, intensified, was broken by the throb of the car or the far-off bleat of scattered sheep; even the hoarse cry of the rooks, as they swarmed down on a patch where the snow had melted, struck the ear more sharply, and the creaking wheels of a passing cart seemed profane, a desecration of Nature's spell. The sun poured down generously, to be caught in prisms by the drops on the hedges, bent by the winter gales. Everywhere was light and colour and a sense of freedom that rose supreme, intoxicating, in the air, pure and cold, of the great uplands.

Sheila's cheeks were rosy now as she clung to her veil, resisting the wind that threatened her little fur cap, wedged down over her glossy hair.

"Not too much for you?" asked Tim.

"No, it's lovely!" Her eyes were sparkling.

He gave her an approving glance; a mischievous smile tilted his lip.

"You always wanted to see Albrey." He relapsed again into silence.

She began to recognize the country. Here was the stile where she and Logue had lit upon the main road after their long, purposeless walk in a circle among the hills. She remembered how he had vaulted over, standing there with his back to her while she surmounted the obstacle, too shy to give her a hand.

Shy? Could he be shy now? She caught at the thought with a passion of hope, fighting against her old depression.

Soon they came to the straggling clump of snowy blackthorn where they had sheltered, Sheila crouching on Logue's coat, "visualizing"—she smiled at her thoughts. Vividly before her eyes rose the picture of the big man in his faded blue shirt, his brown eyes fixed on her, intent upon the first lesson.

Beyond her lay The Empty Road, and across the brow of the hill a ribbon of light shone dazzlingly on the white chalk against the sky-line. Over the crest Albrey hid ; the hidden valley. Her pulses quickened. Unconsciously she leaned forward, her spirit urging Scuttering Jane up the last, steep climb.

Now! She caught her breath as the car with thudding engines quivered, relaxed. They were over, descending a gradient like the side of a house, brakes grinding, Tim absorbed with a dangerous turn in the road ahead. As they rounded the curve a little cry of wonder broke from Sheila's lips.

Before them, in a cup-like hollow, nestled a village with warm tiled roofs, like blackberry leaves stained by the autumn, with here and there the relief of thatch or the grey stone of some old farm, sprinkled with snow and lightly veiled by the smoke that curled from crooked chimneys.

It was like a welcoming human presence after the loneliness of the downs, suggesting firesides and simple comfort, a rest for man from his battle with Nature.

"Unexpected, isn't it?" Tim's voice startled her. "It's our show village. You must admire it. It takes a lot to beat Albrey."

"I should think so. It's delicious."

They swept into the sleepy hollow. Children, playing on the doorsteps, stared, round-eyed, at the car ; an urchin, bolder than the rest, pitched a pebble at the wheels.

"Arrah, would yer!" Tim shouted. He grinned at Sheila. "Little devils! They run out and invite a man to murder them in cold blood. Here's the inn! When you're tired of exploring, you might take a rest there. But I don't suppose I shall keep you waiting." He chuckled, for no apparent reason.

They wound round yet another curve of the twisted streets, between cottages that leaned up against one another like sleepy children, with little gardens and jutting roofs and, here and there, a painted gate adding its note of faded colour to the harmonious whole. Suddenly, Tim stopped the car.

"Do I get out?" she asked, surprised, glancing at the road before her.

"If you don't mind." He jumped down. "I promised Cara that you should see, first of all, her pet cottage. It's a bit of a climb, but well worth it. Up there——"

She followed his gesture, across the cobble-stone pavement.

Before her rose some worn steps, laid at irregular intervals, as aids in the steep ascent of a little lane, or village alley, between a pair of thatched dwellings. It wore a mysterious air as though it beckoned the passer-by.

Tim helped her down and glanced at his watch. His face was red as he looked up.

"I say, I'm late. I must catch that farmer. Do you think you could find the way for yourself?"

"Of course! Do I go up those steps?"

"Yes. I expect they're slippery. There's a better path round the corner. It's only a stone's-throw from here. But promise me you'll find that cottage? It's a picture—you won't regret it. And Cara will be so vexed if you don't."

"Rather! Now, don't you stay." She nodded, aware of his anxious expression. He seemed in a fever to be off. "If it snows, look out for me at the inn. But I'm going to explore first. I'm sure I shall find it worth while."

He opened his lips to answer her, checked himself, and sprang into the car. She saw that his shoulders were shaking with laughter.

"What *is* the joke?'" she asked, perplexed.

"N—nothing," he spluttered, and was off. Then he turned his head. "Good luck!" he shouted, his face still convulsed with mirth, and started his motor-horn.

The shrill note wailed like a siren through the peace of the

little hamlet, where no traffic called for the warning, and was caught up by the echoing roofs.

"He's mad!" said Sheila to herself, with an involuntary smile, as she began to mount the steps. "I wonder what amused him so?" She tried to recall her own words.

On either side lay kitchen gardens, frost-bound, which she could glimpse through the torn gaps in the hedge. Then fresh cottages began. One of these blocked the view. To avoid it the path took a sharp turn round a tumble-down outhouse where an old retriever drowsed in the sun and fowls scattered at her approach.

She turned the corner and paused for breath, for her heavy coat weighed on her. She seemed to have reached open country, fields and orchards spreading out with one last straggler from the village, a thatched dwelling that stood back from the widening lane, with a wicket-gate and a cinder-path leading up to the porch. Across the gate a man was leaning, bare-headed, with rough, thick hair. His eyes were turned in her direction.

Her heart checked in its beat. She could not move. She stood there, dazed, as the gate clicked, and with swift strides, loose-limbed, he bore down on her. She felt his hands grasp her shoulders, he gave one look into her face, then she was caught in his embrace; silently, with no word between them, only the leap of their senses, the knowledge that life held out to them this wonderful union of body and spirit.

A child's shrill giggle brought them apart. From under the hedge a rosy face was grinning widely, full of mischief, a mud-stained finger pointed at them.

"Val—he *saw* us!" Sheila fled. Up the path, through the wicket gate, Logue, laughing, in her wake. She stopped at the porch, flushed and doubtful.

"It's all right." He reached her side. "Go on. It's my cottage—*ours*. I only hope that you'll like it."

She turned.

"'Ours'? I *don't* understand!" Why—oh, *Val*!"

His arm went round her.

"Come inside. Don't mind that child. Why shouldn't he laugh? He was made for laughter. So are you, you dear wonder! Let me have a look at you! I can't believe I've got you here. Safe—to myself, after—centuries!"

He drew her into the low-roofed room that opened out of the porch. Through latticed windows the winter sun shone on the dark polished boards and shamed the fire in the wide grate, that yet gave a homely touch, with its pile of rough-hewn logs. On a gate-legged table in the centre, among books and scattered papers, stood a little bowl of violets.

"*Your* flowers." Logue smiled. "Do you remember the bunch you gave me?"

She nodded her head. His eyes narrowed.

"What's the matter?" he asked simply.

"Only—oh, I can't explain."

"Yes, you can. We'll have no secrets. Tell me, Sheila. What have I done?"

"It's what you haven't done," she whispered. "All these months—and never a word!"

"I wrote you a letter every day."

Her face cleared as if by magic.

"*Val!* I never received one."

"I know. Because I didn't post them. You didn't expect me to, did you?"

"Why ever not?"

She stared at him. He was frowning at her, plainly puzzled.

"I tried to do the right thing. You don't know how hard it was. Cara was my only comfort. She kept me informed of all your doings. I used to follow your route on the map and picture you in the South; visualize the old places, with you in the foreground—such beauty! I never quite got out of touch, but sometimes it nearly drove me mad. To know I had only to take a ticket and be with you there—in the sunshine—when London was a wilderness. But I held out. For the six months."

"Explain." She slid her hand into his.

Her touch upset his line of thought.

"Take this off"—he touched her coat—"and your hat. I want to feel you're here, at home with me—my wife to be." His voice shook.

She obeyed him, struggling with a sense of amazement, still dazed by her mixed emotions.

Now she stood, slim as a girl in her plain black dress, fingering the curled pink chrysanthemum. Her eyes fell on the flower.

"So Cara knew?"

Logue nodded. He could not divert his thoughts from Sheila.

"How sweet you look! Come here." He led her to the dark settle that screened one side of the open hearth and watched the firelight play on her hair. "Will you like this cottage? It's rather small, but I thought it would do for our honeymoon, and week-ends later on. I bought it from old Trehearne and furnished it bit by bit. It kept me alive all these months."

"Then you never had any doubt of me?"

"Never. And you?"

Her gaze fell. She felt curiously ashamed in the face of her lover's perfect trust.

"Sometimes," she admitted. "When you didn't write or make a sign."

"But I wanted to please you."

Sheila smiled.

"Did you think that silence would have that result?"

He ran his hand through his hair, his usual sign of discomfiture.

"Listen." He sat down beside her. "I was afraid of some hideous blunder. I don't understand social ways. It's my first tribute to convention." A twinkle crept into his eyes. "It seems I've made a mess of it! I was so anxious not to hurt you, and I guessed exactly how you felt. The shock"—he stammered—"and everything else. So at last I went to see the mater. And she said I was to wait six months.

That this was the usual course; that I mustn't make *any* sign. So I waited. Haven't I done right?"

For a moment Sheila hesitated. She knew now to whom she owed those long weeks of despair. Mrs. Logue had been engrossed in her old jealous game with her son. Here was a threatening daughter-in-law; and no mere girl who might have bent to her gentle tyranny, no embryo housekeeper to snub. But Sheila could not undeceive Val or destroy his faith in his mother. And Mrs. Logue had a strong case. Convention had been satisfied.

She answered his question with another.

"Did you find it hard?" She studied his face.

"*Hard?*" His voice broke on the word. He covered her hand with his own, and the grip hurt her. "What do you think?"

"Ah——" She flushed from sheer joy. With it an impulse of mischief returned that had lain dormant for many weeks. "I like you best unconventional. I don't think etiquette is your forte!"

He laughed.

"Oh, I'll satisfy you there. You'll be an artist's wife, remember." He went on more soberly, following up the train of thought. "I hope you never will regret it. I'm not a rich man, Sheila, but I'm doing pretty well, at last. Will you miss your old luxurious life?"

"No." She was touched, yet amused. "Shall I have to cook?" she asked him gravely.

"Heaven forbid!—and spoil those hands." He gathered them up to his lips. "There's one thing I want to say, but I don't quite know how to put it."

"Well?" She leaned against his shoulder, half guessing the thought in his mind.

"I'd like you to be dependent on me. For everything. I don't know——" He hesitated.

She filled the gap.

"What Philip left me? Nothing much. Practically no income."

He drew a deep sigh of relief. He had always hated Antrobus, and the thought of the dead man's money had been a weight upon his spirit.

"Good. That's better than I hoped."

"But I have a little of my own." She could not leave him in ignorance, though her heart gloried in the knowledge of her lover's mistake in regard to her income. "Quite my own. From my father. You won't mind that?" Her eyes were anxious.

"Enough to dress on?" he asked simply.

"Ample." She smiled in her sleeve.

For the first time since her girlhood she realized the joy of wealth. To give freely, unasked; to surround Logue in his dark hours with little comforts and ease the strain of his labour—what happiness lay before her!

"All right. I'll swallow that. So long as you keep it for yourself. I'd like you to have pretty clothes. My mother always talked of your taste. She said that everything you wore seemed suitable."

"To my age?" laughed Sheila. "Where is your mother now?"

"I've lent her my studio. She's staying there over Christmas, with a girl—one of her latest finds." A twinkle came into his eyes. "I rather believe she's planning something—up to her old devices to marry us off. It may be Ralph. But Norah's not at all his style. A pretty face and a blank mind. I'm afraid I've been rather rude to her. But she's such a worry when I'm working—thinks she can paint and she can't! The mater's been ramming her down my throat. In the end, I bolted here."

"Perhaps you were to be the victim?" Sheila suggested.

Logue stared.

"Impossible! The mater knew."

Silence held them for a little. They dreamed, gazing into the fire. Then a new thought struck Sheila.

"What about my Suffrage work?"

He raised his head and looked at her.

"You want to go on with it?"

"Of course. I can't 'rat' now, just because I love you."

"No. You're right," he answered gravely. He drew her close. "Thank God, darling, we're good friends as well as lovers. And the test of friendship is tolerance; to accept the presence of opinions dissimilar to one's own. So long as these do not involve fundamental principles, such as a man's sense of honour, they should add variety to life. Otherwise marriage is a burden. If Women's Suffrage is a part of your vision of Utopia I dare not rob you of your dreams. I want you exactly as you are; not altered to suit my own pattern."

"You *dear*!" She touched his hair with her fingers, lightly smoothing the thick mass, resistant and full of vigour. "I've longed to do that," she confessed.

He caught her to him.

"Oh, Sheila, *Sheila*! I can't believe it's true yet."

Simply, she lifted her lips to his. And with his kiss she solved her old childish problem once for all.

There was a love, intensely human, in which passion held full share and the joy of youth, but which, in its essence, was sanctified by reverence.

In all her troublous adventures she had missed this that her parents had known. In that moment she understood her mother, as never before in her life. Something fine in her mother's soul had exacted this from the vigorous man whom she had steadily raised to her standards, however old-fashioned they might seem in the eyes of the swifter generation. Her life had been a success.

Sheila dreamed, her cheek against Logue's. Suddenly he felt her start.

"What's that—that curious noise? I've heard it for ever so long."

Logue listened, then burst out laughing.

"It's poor old Tim! Like a frozen Pan, playing forlornly on his pipes. I'd forgotten all about him! We must go, dearest. I'm coming with you. Cara is expecting me. Wait

while I fetch my suit-case." He sprang up. "That's his signal."

"Then Tim knows too?" She followed Logue, pinning on her hat and veil.

"Rather! You don't mind, do you?"

"And this wasn't an accident? It was all arranged—my drive to Albrey?"

"I plead guilty." Unrepentant, he smiled at her. "I remembered the picture and what you told me. Some great adventure that lay beyond the brow of the hill. Has the hidden valley proved all you hoped?"

"More." In the porch she paused. "Why, it's snowing. I'm glad of that." She turned up her fur collar.

"It reminds you of our first walk? Lord, what a fool I was! I tried so hard to get rid of you." He tucked a hand through her arm. "But you hung on." His eyes dared her.

"Yes, I wanted my woman's rights—equality," she flung back. "You *see* if we don't get the Vote!"

They made their way down the lane. As they turned the corner they saw Tim, below them, still grimly clutching the horn, his face blank and despairing, huddled low in his seat, communing with Scuttering Jane.

At the sound of their steps he turned his head.

"*Well!*" His voice spoke volumes, his cheeks were mottled with the cold. But at the sight of their happiness his wrath melted. "Bless you, my children! Where's that rice?" He jumped down, his hands outstretched to the pair. As he helped Sheila into her seat he bent his head and whispered slyly, "An' did you find the walk *worth while*?"

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